



ART AS THE ABSOLUTE

Art's Relation to Metaphysics in Kant, Fichte,
Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer

Paul Gordon

B L O O M S B U R Y

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In loving memory of Edwin E. Ugorowski

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Preface

For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize. Aristotle, *Metaphysics I*, 982b12 (tr. Ross)

It would not be much of an exaggeration, if it is one at all, to claim that the German idealists were as obsessed with the idea of the absolute as the philosophers who followed them were indifferent to it. Although this is not a view unshared by the leading scholars of the field,¹ it is a view that may help to explain why these philosophers are often slighted by later generations. Indeed, what should be viewed as one of the most productive and glorious periods in the history of philosophy is instead viewed as something of an embarrassment, although this has thankfully changed from the time when Bertrand Russell could dismiss someone like Fichte as “insane.”² And yet, even among the many works that have appeared in the last few decades that have attempted to reclaim the many famous and many of the not-so-famous philosophers of this period, there is still a reluctance to give the important questions raised by their interest in the absolute its due.³ And, even among those few who do acknowledge the idea’s importance, there is an unwillingness to deal with the fact that, for many of these philosophers (including Kant), the role of art in dealing with matters pertaining to the absolute is critically important (a holdover, to be sure, from the Platonic definition of “philosophy” as excluding art).

The thesis of this book is simply stated: art exists by virtue of its relation to what Kant calls the “supersensible” “thing-in-itself,” and what others after Kant, such as Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer and Hegel, referred to more succinctly

¹ The “All” of Paul Franks’ *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* refers to what he sees as the defining characteristic of German Idealism, its insistence on creating an all-embracing metaphysical system based upon the “all” of the absolute. He then goes on to point out that it is precisely this insistence that has alienated them from analytic and continental philosophy alike.

² Quoted by Paul Franks in *All or Nothing*, 144.

³ An exception to this neglect would be the discussion of this idea through the “back door,” as it were, of Spinoza’s influence on the Idealists. See, for example, *Spinoza and German Idealism* (2012). And yet, as Errol Harris has noted, this anti-metaphysical thinking extends also to Spinoza himself:

In recent years, the reaction against metaphysics, by Logical Positivists, Existentialists, and even some Phenomenologists, has resulted in a decline of interest in Spinoza. (viii)

as “the absolute” (*das Absolute*.) This idea, whose explicit rendering begins with Kant (“Kant is the first to do justice to the aesthetic at the heart of what one can call a “first philosophy”⁴) and ends with the “end of art’s” supposedly inadequate representation of the absolute according to Hegel, is examined in the main body of this book in major works during the forty year period from 1790 to 1830.⁵ (There are also two chapters, at the beginning and end of this work, on Plato and Nietzsche, that deal with precursors and “post-cursors” of this idea respectively.) And, finally, it is perhaps important to state at the outset that I came to this problem as someone trained in the interdisciplinary study of art and literature (“comparative literature”) rather than, contrariwise, as someone who is primarily interested in the extraordinary period and philosophers in question here—the difference being, I hope, one that is more methodological than it is substantial.

Indeed, one might think that the logical place to pursue this idea of an “aesthetic absolute” would be my own field of post-structuralist “literary theory,” a discipline which eschews the anti-aesthetic tendencies of philosophy after Plato (a tendency which is nowhere more evident than in the Anglo-American field of “aesthetics”⁶) and which challenges the rigor of analytic philosophy with the rigor of its own figuration-based “close readings.” And, indeed, there is much to suggest (as I have numerous occasions to note throughout this volume) that notions like Kant’s “subjective universals,” Schelling’s *Indifferenz*, Fichte’s *hiatus irrationalis* (“irrational gap”), etc. are not only compatible but synonymous with certain key notions of “deconstruction.”⁷

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” *Of the Sublime*, 27.

⁵ In *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, a title which refers to the claims of Kant and Hegel to have begun and ended philosophy itself, Eckart Förster offers many valuable insights into (roughly) the same period of philosophy discussed here without, however, the emphasis of the present volume on the “aesthetic absolute.” I have learned much, and derived much inspiration, from the work of Förster and other major scholars in this field (Frederick Beiser, Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank), all of whom share the general view (with particular differences) that the question of the absolute and how it can or cannot be known is central to this period.

⁶ This field, which is dominated by the perennial question “what is art?,” is doomed from the outset by a logical, empirical approach that results in countless tautological assertions (“something is an artwork if it is intended to provide the person who contemplates it for its own sake with an aesthetic experience” *The Philosophy of Art*, 36) and vague observations (“Collingwood (*Principles of Art*) defines art primarily as an activity: that of clarifying an emotion ...” *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, 87—what could be clearer?).

⁷ In *Kant after Derrida* there are numerous attempts to smooth over the apparent rift between Derrida and the seemingly anathema ideas of Kant in particular and Idealism in general, while scrupulously avoiding the possibility that Derrida may have gotten it wrong with his reading of Kant. Instead, one often finds arguments to the effect that there is more in common between Kant and Derrida than one was led to believe. For example, “I have tried to show that one can pursue a reading of Kant’s theory of duty through a reading of *The Critique of Judgment* to find Kant closer to Derrida than

Unfortunately, as John McGowan has rightly claimed, “post-modern writers inevitably find themselves at odds with Kant,” and, I would add, his successors.⁸ Derrida’s derisive reading of Kant’s third *Critique*, which is “framed” by a surprisingly facile criticism of the *parergon*,⁹ is symptomatic of a distrust, not only of Kant but of anything “absolute.” Following Derrida’s reading, Krell’s *The Tragic Absolute* (discussed below), and Rajan’s *Idealism without Absolutes* are further examples of this misunderstanding of this absolute as univocal. (As Dalia Nassar rightly notes, the “romantic absolute” must be nondiscursive or nonconceptual.”¹⁰) Rodolphe Gasché’s reading of Kant’s third *Critique*,¹¹ while far more generous than Derrida’s, is nonetheless lacking in any connection between the “reflective judgments” which he, like Zammito, applauds as a crucial “cognitive turn” in Kant’s thinking, and the notion of the supersensible on which such judgments and “aesthetic ideas” are based.¹² Post-structural theory is only now beginning to question the Hegelian hegemony which led, I believe, to a devaluing of Kant and his successors, but it is still far from the realization that, to paraphrase Nietzsche’s rebuke of Platonism, Hegel is less the zenith than the nadir of his glorious cultural milieu. My hope is that this work may serve not only as an argument for the idea of an aesthetic absolute but for the relevance of this idea, and the thinkers who propounded it, to a post-structuralist, post-modern realm of discourse to which, I believe, it properly belongs.

In the first of two chapters on Kant, I credit the author of the monumental “transcendental deduction” with the first explicit rendering of art’s inherent relation to the absolute. While the great majority of the treatises on Kant give diminishing importance from the first through the third *Critiques*, even those which do focus on the latter largely ignore the most important aspects of his treatise on art and the aesthetic¹³—indeed, many insist, despite numerous state

might be expected” (Custer, 193). In Hager Weslaty’s brilliant essay on “Aporias of the *As If*” the rift between the two “schools of thought,” despite the attempt at a reconciliation, is still apparent:

For Derrida, the ‘as if’ [of Kant] would be an essential component of ‘difference’ ... This position, which goes against the very essentials of Kant’s metaphysics, is no longer concerned with laying foundations (*Grundlegung*) but with dissemination and expansion (*Erweiterung*). (43)

⁸ Quoted by Cheetham, 71.

⁹ *The Truth in Painting* (1987).

¹⁰ *The Romantic Absolute*, 5.

¹¹ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics*.

¹² Zammito, 45.

¹³ Although Paul Guyer discusses aesthetic matters at length in *Kant*, there is no mention of the relation of the aesthetic to the absolute that is the subject here.

ments by Kant himself and some of his more enlightened critics (including Goethe¹⁴), that the third *Critique* is not about art at all! And while Salim Kemal, the principal defender of the third *Critique*'s relevance to fine art as well as to natural beauty and sublimity, argues even more forcefully than John Zammito the latter's point that "Any '*Critique* of taste' which would account for the beauty only of foliage but not of da Vinci, of sea shells but not of Shakespeare, would not have had great standing in eighteenth-century culture,"¹⁵ in Kemal's two major treatises on the subject¹⁶ there is no mention of the supersensible in relation to art or aesthetics in general. Conversely, in works which argue explicitly for the importance of the supersensible in the third *Critique*, art is seen as less important than its greater teleological import.¹⁷ The present work seeks to unify both these "schools of thought" in arguing that for Kant, and even more explicitly for his successors in the Idealist tradition (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer), fine art, beauty and sublimity are all defined by their relation to the supersensible and not merely as a means to some loftier metaphysical end. If, as I argue here, this metaphysical notion is essential to the aesthetics of Kant and his successors,

¹⁴ "Here [in *The Critique of Judgment*] I saw my most diverse thoughts brought together, artistic and natural production handled in the same way, the powers of aesthetic and teleological judgment mutually illuminating each other." Goethe, quoted by Cheetham, *Kant, Art and Art History*, 21–2.

¹⁵ *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 124. For more on Zammito's defense of the importance of fine art in the third *Critique*, see 131, where he quotes Kant: "Nature proved beautiful when it wore the appearance of art; and art can only be termed beautiful, when we are conscious of its being art ..."

¹⁶ Salim Kemal, *Kant and Fine Art* and *Kant's Aesthetic Theory*.

¹⁷ In Gary Banham's *Kant and the Ends of Aesthetics* the author argues strongly for the supersensible as the unifying principle of the two parts of the third *Critique* ("The unity of the supersensibles in fact points to the possibility of the unity of the *Critique* of Aesthetic judgment with the *Critique* of Teleological Judgment in one work ...") but relegates fine art to natural beauty and both to teleology. Anthony Savile (*Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*) likewise validates the premise of this book:

We generally manage to read the *Critique [of Judgment]* independently of the idealistic metaphysic so central to Kant's thought elsewhere. At one important juncture, though, that current erupts in dramatic and puzzling fashion. I have in mind the sections of the book that present, and purportedly resolve, the antinomy of taste (#56–7), together with the two immediately following Remarks. Kant is concerned there to situate the beautiful in its proper conceptual niche, and he appears to do this by unreservedly rooting it in the supersensible substrate of phenomena. (40, emphasis mine)

Savile's ambivalence with regard to this thesis ("he appears ...") is confirmed elsewhere in his work, where, for example, he notes that: "The effect of these criticisms should encourage us to think that Kant has something else in mind than locating indeterminable properties, like the beautiful ... in the noumenal as opposed to the phenomenal world" (57); and: "The more generous way of taking his allusions to the supersensible is as a reminder of just where our questions must stop" (62). Finally, this "begrudging approval" is also evident in Paul Guyer, who notes that Kant "finally succumbed to the lure of a 'pseudo-rational' inference of a supersensible substratum underlying both men and nature." *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, 7.

then it is also essential to the claims of Mark Kipperman,¹⁸ Mark Cheetham and others that Kant's importance for art and art history in general and even the most "post-modern" theories of art in particular is much greater than imagined, where "Kant's name is virtually unmentioned in the historiography of art."¹⁹

My introductory chapter on Plato's *Symposium* argues that the notion of an aesthetic absolute is implicit in Diotima's speech, while the main body of this work examines art's explicit relation to the supersensible absolute in the Introduction of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Chapter 1), *The Critique of Teleological Judgment* (Chapter 2), Fichte's *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy* ("Über Geist und Buchstabe in der Philosophie," Chapter 3), Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (Chapter 4) and his *Philosophy of Art* (Chapter 5), Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* and *Lectures on Aesthetics* (Chapter 6) and Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (Chapter 7). In the Appendix I examine Nietzsche's supposed rejection of the Kantian absolute in the *Second Prefaces* to *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Gay Science* in order to reclaim the validity of an aesthetic absolute in Nietzsche's own writings. The devastating, two-prong attack on the aesthetic absolute by Hegel's rejection of the "sensible appearance of the Idea" as not rational enough and Nietzsche's contrary notion of the Kantian absolute as *too* rational should serve as a warning that the rejection of the absolute in general, and its objective realization in art, is not as definitive as its authors, and the subsequent aesthetic tradition, would have it.

With this reference to one of Nancy's later works one should say something about an influential earlier one, *L'absolu littéraire* (1978), with which the present work would seem to have much in common. As limited as the scope of the present work attempts to be, the scope of Nancy/Lacoue-Labarthes' work is focused on the even shorter period of the Jena romantics and their publications in the short-lived *Athenaeum* (1797–8). Both works focus on aesthetics in the aftermath of Kant's third *Critique*, but their very different plans and trajectories are perhaps best defined by the translator's *Introduction* to the former:

whereas idealism embodies the fulfillment of the Subject in the labor of the Concept, constructing the living System of Philosophy, the Jena romantics (along with the romantic-modern period in general) envision the production

¹⁸ In *Beyond Enchantment* the author argues forcefully for the importance of German Idealism to English romantic poetry, but does not explicitly discuss the notion of an aesthetic absolute that is the subject here (e.g. there is no discussion of Kant's third *Critique*) and which, I believe, would serve to clarify many of Kipperman's excellent readings of Byron, Shelley, et al.

¹⁹ Mark Cheetham, *Kant, Art and Art History*, 16.

of the Subject (the Subject's auto-production) in the work of art, which is to say both in the artwork and in its generative or operative productivity (its "creativity"). In one sense, as Lacoue-Labarthes and Nancy point out, Friedrich Schlegel even envisages the completion of philosophy in the work of art. The adequate presentation of the subject is thus accomplished through what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call eidaesthetics, or the (attempted) subsumption and presentation of the Idea with the work of art. (xv)

One difference, then, between these two works is that what I call "aesthetico-physics," and what *L'absolu littéraire* refers to as "eidaesthetics," is addressed "in the labor of the Concept, constructing the living System of Philosophy," beginning with my revisionist reading of the *Symposium* and ending with Schopenhauer's explicit redefinition of the Platonic Idea in distinctly aesthetic terms. Although these two works obviously have much in common and, indeed, share a similar emphasis on the primary role of art and/or "literature's" figurative potencies, the present work studies the more "philosophical" discussion of these issues which frame the Jena-group's goals and aspirations.²⁰ *L'absolu littéraire* does not discuss the absolute as such unless it is qualified as the "literary absolute," whereas, for Kant and his philosophical successors, art and literature, while they do indeed have a privileged role in accessing the absolute, are themselves conditioned by the problematics of an "All" which explains, as well as being explained by, the mixing of genres and other aspects of the Jena romantics' notion of the "absolute of literature, its perfect closure upon itself" (11). Put even more succinctly: the explicitly "philosophical" texts surrounding the period of the Jena romantics must also be studied as a way of deconstructing philosophy and carrying out the "reversal of Platonism" which Deleuze has famously declared to be the ultimate goal of all post-modern thinking. When one realizes that the Kantian "supersensible" is also *the sensible as it exists in art* (Kant's notion of "intellectual intuition" is the same as aesthetic intuition²¹), then it becomes imperative to return to the

²⁰ As Dalia Nassar notes in her recent (2014) work on *The Romantic Absolute*: "[Manfred] Frank wishes to distinguish himself from post-modern interpretations such as Lacoue-Labarthes' and Nancy's, for whom the absolute is a fiction." (83, emphasis mine).

²¹ Kant's notion of an "intellectual intuition" (*intellektuelle Anschauung*) that "is not the intuition we possess" is discussed throughout this work and, in particular, in the second Kant chapter. Rafael Hüntelmann discusses the idea, which Hegel (predictably) dismisses as "mystical," in *Schellings Philosophie der Schöpfung*, 116ff.), as the perception in which "Gott ist mit der Welt identisch und er ist mit ihr nicht identisch" (121).

more philosophical texts which are explicitly engaged in this philosophical overturning of philosophy itself.²²

Like *L'absolu littéraire*, David Krell's more recent (2005) work focuses on *The Tragic Absolute* in German Idealism as "the demise of the metaphysical absolute as such" (17). While the present work is in agreement with both works in arguing for what Krell refers to as a critical shift away from the "traditional absolutes" (4), I see the shift as changing the way we think about art's metaphysical role in general or, to be more precise, the way art frees metaphysical thought from more objective, empirical modes of thinking. I don't disagree with Krell's insistence that the absolute is "caught in catastrophe," but I argue that this "catastrophe," in reversing the onto-theological Fall through works of art which provide our "intellectual intuition" of an absolute, is far more positive than Professor Krell's work contends, and that, rather than declaring "the demise of the metaphysical absolute as such," we should take the Idealists at their word when they repeatedly insist that the metaphysical absolute is revealed in every work of art, tragic or otherwise.

Dalia Nassar's recent (2014) work on *The Romantic Absolute* is, in a way, the converse of *L'absolu littéraire*, for, whereas the earlier work emphasized the literary to the exclusion of the philosophical absolute, the thesis of Nassar's work is that the explicit philosophical concept of the absolute is more important in German Romanticism than has been previously acknowledged. In her discussion of Novalis, for example, she largely ignores the writer's poetic works in favor of his more philosophical writings, such as the early *Fichte-Studien*. Although there is much in Nassar's work, such as her emphasis on the oft-ignored but critical notion of "intellectual intuition" and, above all, her emphasis on the importance of the absolute as such, that is compatible with many of the arguments proffered here, the present work differs from hers in emphasizing the notion of an aesthetic absolute, i.e. an absolute that is synonymous with art, and vice versa. For example, in her discussion of Schelling, Nassar argues that, despite Schelling's early privileging of art's relation to the absolute: "Upon closer examination it becomes doubtful whether the artwork can in fact achieve this goal" (26). The crux of Nassar's reason for declaring the artwork inadequate (a position which, given her similar "declaration of independence" from Hegel, is

²² Like *L'absolu littéraire*, Manfred Frank's *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* focuses on the romantics as distinguished from the idealists, and while he discusses the idea of the absolute in much more theory than Nancy/Lacoue-Labarthes, he stresses, more than I would, the differences between the two groups *vis-a-vis* the aesthetic absolute as a philosophical concept.

surprising) is that art is a product and, as such, cannot be absolute. This criticism fails to take into account Kant's solution to this problem in declaring the essence of the aesthetic to be "disinterested" and non-objective, which explains why her argument that Schelling abandoned art's positive relation to the absolute is consistently ambiguous (e.g. "*It becomes doubtful* whether the artwork can achieve this goal" (226) and "*it may very well have been* the reason behind the shift in his view regarding the work of art and its relation to reason" (227).

Finally: in Schiller's *Das verschleierte Bild zu Saïs* (1795) he expands on Kant's famous footnote about the "veil of Isis"²³ in telling the story of a young man who, eagerly pursuing knowledge of "the All," ignores his learned teacher's advice by sneaking into the temple of Isis at night in order to see the "all that is, and was, and ever will be" that lies under the goddess's veil. As one might expect, Schiller's story and the idea on which it is based (which Kant, in a rare moment of *Schwärmerei*, had earlier referred to as "perhaps the most sublime utterance ever"²⁴), has generated commentary by Novalis, Heine, Nietzsche and, most recently, an entire volume by Pierre Hadot.²⁵ This well-trodden tale of the absolute takes a different turn, however, when it is considered within the context of the work of art, a context which is never very far from the various versions of the story just mentioned—Kant, for example, adduces it as an example of how fine art expresses truths that can never be known as such. Placed within this aesthetic context, the meaning of the story, and the idea on which it is based, is that art reveals, or better "re-veils," the absolute—"all that is, and was, and ever will be"—in veiled forms which can never be lifted by a mortal, but which *can* be seen in artworks whereby one becomes, as Diotima declares at the end of her own speech about seeing the absolute, "immortal, if ever mortal may."²⁶ The mistake of Schiller's youth was to lift the veil in order to see the absolute, rather than seeing the absolute in the veiled figure before him—whether that of the statue or, as Kant explains, in figures of speech ("aesthetic ideas"). "I am all that is, that was, and that will ever be, and no mortal hath lifted my veil" can thus be heard differently, with a "different *Tonart*" (Heidegger), as meaning that the veiled artwork *is* the absolute.

²³ In *The Critique of Judgment*, "The Analytic of the Sublime," #49, "The Faculties of the Mind that Constitute Genius."

²⁴ "Vielleicht ist nie etwas Erhabneres gesagt, ode ein Gedanke erhabener ausgedrückt ..."

²⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Le voile d'Isis/The Veil of Isis*.

²⁶ In all of the writers discussed here there is an obvious connection, as there is in this brief discussion of the "Veil of Isis," between theology and the aesthetic absolute. Although, for example, Rafael Hüntelmann rarely mentions art or the aesthetic in *Schellings Philosophie der Schöpfung*, this valuable work contains many insights into this relation, such as his insistence that Schelling, following Kant, designates "dieses Ding an sich als den eigentlichen Grund unserer Anschauungen" (106).

Introduction: *The Symposium* on Art as the Absolute

But now, what kind of knowledge is it that considers what continues to exist outside and independently of all relations, but which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and is therefore known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the Ideas that are the immediate and adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself, of the will? It is art, the work of genius. Schopenhauer¹

... after all, only liars can appropriately reply to love. Lacan, Seminar II²

While explicit philosophical discussions of “substance” and the metaphysical “thing-in-itself” are as old as philosophy itself, Kant’s recognition at the end of the eighteenth century that art, which had previously been denied any serious metaphysical importance whatsoever, is inherently metaphysical in providing a bridge to the supersensible absolute is new in the history of philosophy.³ From the standpoint of the history of art and philosophy this window into art’s metaphysical importance remained open only briefly, from 1790 (the date of Kant’s third and final *Critique*) to 1830 (the date of Hegel’s discussion of art in *Encyclopaedia* III).⁴ In Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer the notion which

¹ *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 184.

² *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VIII. *Transference* 1960–1 (11/23/60), 22. This statement is with specific regard to the *Symposium*.

³ Although Frederick Beiser is close to the thesis of this book when he states that “One of the most remarkable traits of the early German romantics was their belief in the metaphysical stature of art” (*The Romantic Imperative*, 73), I disagree with his contention that “By disputing the objective element of aesthetic judgment, Kant’s aesthetics did not challenge [the “Enlightenment dogma of the sovereignty of reason”] but simply completed this trend” (73). It is simply incorrect to state that the “young romantics,” and not Kant, “assigned a role to the feeling and intuition of aesthetic experience.” Indeed, the question that Beiser poses: “What were the sources and influences on the young romantics that made it possible for them to break with the Enlightenment?” should be restated as: “What were the sources and influences on *Kant* that made it possible for *him* to break with the Enlightenment”!

⁴ In *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy*, a title which refers to the claims of Kant and Hegel to have begun and ended philosophy itself, Eckart Förster offers tremendous insights into (roughly) the same period of philosophy discussed here without, however, the emphasis of the present volume on the “aesthetic absolute.” I have also learned much, and derived much inspiration, from the work of the other three giants of this field (Friederick Beiser, Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank), all of

had been inaugurated by Kant is taken to the extreme point where “art is itself an emanation of the absolute,”⁵ whereas Hegel, despite acknowledging that art is the “sensible appearance of the Idea,” returned philosophy to Plato’s view that art must nonetheless be excluded from metaphysics and, indeed, from any serious philosophical consideration whatsoever (hence the now dubious category of “aesthetics”). This window into art’s relation to the absolute remained closed until it was reopened one hundred years later, after Heidegger’s own aesthetic “turn” following *Being and Time*. (Nietzsche’s ambivalent position that “art, rather than ethics, constitutes the essential metaphysical activity of man”⁶ will be discussed in the final chapter, or Appendix, to this work.) And while recent philosophers have devoted more and more attention to this second “golden age” of philosophy they have nonetheless followed Hegel (and Plato) in largely ignoring the metaphysical importance of art, despite numerous statements by Kant, Fichte and Schelling to the contrary—it is as if Kant had never written a third *Critique*, Fichte had never elevated the “aesthetic-” over the “knowledge-drive,”⁷ and Schelling had retreated from his claim that “the universal organon of philosophy—and the keystone of its entire arch—is the philosophy of art.”⁸ It is this lacuna that the present work hopes to address and, more importantly, this error that it hopes to correct, for much is at stake in reclaiming the metaphysical importance of art and thereby reversing Platonism’s pernicious separation of art and philosophy.

In the main body of this work I will attempt to focus on this idea as it appears during this relatively brief but important period in the history of aesthetics separating Kant’s third *Critique* from Hegel’s *Vorlesungen* and *Encyclopaedia*. My purpose in this Introduction is to introduce this problem by returning to the Platonic text where art’s philosophical relation to the absolute is implicitly asserted and explicitly denied, much as it is in the Hegelian texts which will be discussed towards the end of the present work.

*

Every reader of the *Symposium* would agree that Diotima’s speech about love, beauty and the quest for absolute truth constitutes the apex of Plato’s most

whom share the general view (with particular differences) that the question of the absolute and how it can or cannot be known is central to this period.

⁵ Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, 19.

⁶ 2nd Preface (1886), *The Birth of Tragedy*.

⁷ *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, discussed in Chapter 3 of this work.

⁸ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 12.

formally and artistically refined dialogue.⁹ The speech itself reflects this unusually high level of formal complexity, for it constitutes an additional “framed” discourse within a discourse which is itself already framed—or better, “veiled” (see the preceding Preface)—by the opening discussion by Apollodorus, who reports, via Aristodemus, the events of the banquet to his unnamed friend. And yet, despite the climactic importance of this speech it has rarely been discussed in terms of the aesthetic as such,¹⁰ despite the obvious relevance of beauty to “the supreme knowledge whose object is that absolute beauty [*auto to kalon*] ... where one’s life should be spent” (94¹¹). The reason for this neglect is of course Plato’s well-known—and highly ambiguous—disdain for art,¹² but there is much in the dialogue’s discourse on the love of beauty as leading to the love of the absolute¹³ which would allow one to reconsider Diotima’s speech in terms of the later identification, in Kant, Schelling, and others, of aesthetic beauty with absolute truth. As Jacques Lacan rightly notes in his treatise on the *Symposium*, the speech of Diotima is less a continuation than a disruption of the privileging of scientific, non-aesthetic knowledge that is associated with Socrates: “If he [Socrates] hands things over to Diotima, why should it not be because, concerning love, things could not go any further with the properly Socratic method?”¹⁴

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⁹ And yet this does not prevent some from ignoring Diotima’s final, climactic statement regarding the absolute; e.g. Mary Nichols’ lengthy discussion of the *Symposium* (*Socrates on Friendship and Community*) discusses many aspects of Diotima’s speech but stops abruptly before its conclusion. And, it should go without saying, this is not to diminish the importance of all the other parts of Plato’s dialogue.

¹⁰ In a recent volume of essays on the *Symposium* (*Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*), there is little mention of the role of art (the exception being an essay by Gabriel Richardson Lear, in “Permanent Beauty and Becoming Happy in Plato’s *Symposium*”) but, *pace* Nietzsche (who argued that “art, rather than ethics, constitutes the essential metaphysical activity of man”), much discussion of the identification of the beautiful with the (moral) good.

¹¹ *The Symposium*, trans. Hamilton.

¹² Morriss Partee eloquently emphasizes throughout the notorious ambiguity of Plato’s disdain for art; for example, with regard to the infamous expulsion of poetry in Book X of the *Republic*: “This apparent love of Homer, coupled with the inflexible determination to expel poetry, shows the ambiguity of Plato’s mistrust of poetry.” *Plato’s Poetics*, 140.

¹³ The relationship between love and the absolute is evident in this statement by Seth Bernardete:

Eros [for Plato] combines the desire to behold at a distance with the desire to join into one. The lover’s awareness that the beloved is already complete is coupled with his awareness of his own radical incompleteness ... (*Socrates and Plato: The Dialectics of Eros*, p. 19)

Love’s inherent relationship to the absolute, and vice versa, is evident throughout the history of analyses of both, in both implicit and explicit ways; cf., for example, the reappearance of romantic relationships in the context of a sublimity (e.g. *Faust*) where such romance is, at best, metonymical to an otherwise solitary pursuit, and, explicitly, in the writings of Novalis.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, 7.

Having cleared the room, as it were, of all the contradictory ideas, absurd myths and “excluded middles” of the earlier speeches about love (including those of Socrates himself), Diotima bases her speech on the one truth which remains standing from the previous speeches, namely, that “*love is the desire to possess the good [and the beautiful]¹⁵ forever*” (*o erôs tou to agathon hautô einai aei*). That is to say, love is not itself beautiful, but, rather, it is the desire for the beautiful, and not just the desire for the beautiful, but the desire to possess *forever* the beauty that attracts it. The two main terms of this definition, love and beauty, need to be understood first, after which we will consider the important adverbial link (“forever”) to the absolute. Beauty is to be understood as that which elicits love, and love is that which loves beauty. (Two thousand years later Edmund Burke will repeat this idea: “By beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love ...”¹⁶) The relevance of art to Diotima’s discussion of love and beauty is clear, for a love which loves what is beautiful is clearly as relevant, if not more relevant, to the aesthetic as it is to the other forms of love that Diotima discusses. And just as the aesthetic is obviously relevant to the notion of beauty, it is potentially relevant, as we shall see, to the final stage of this love, which Diotima reveals as love of the absolute, despite the fact that Diotima seemingly excludes artistic beauty from this process.

Indeed, there is much that is gained by including art within the broader perspective of Diotima’s entire speech. First, few would argue against the notion that the so-called “appreciation” of art, either in general or with respect to individual works, is better described as the *love* of art in precisely the way that Diotima (in common with Burke) defines love as the emotion elicited by the presence of beauty. Second, there is also much to be gained by relating Diotima’s insistence on love as the desire to possess the beautiful *forever* to aesthetics in the association of what is beautiful or sublime with the eternal, with that which transcends time or historical periodization (cf. Longinus: “It would be more stimulating if you added the question, ‘What kind of hearing should I get from all future ages if I wrote this?’”¹⁷). This notion of eternal possession is obviously critical to our ultimate goal of linking the love of beauty to the absolute, but what, exactly, is the desire to possess beauty *forever*? For example, would it not be the case that the desire to possess beauty *forever* must also be the desire NOT to possess beauty forever? This desire of love to possess beauty perpetually

¹⁵ “Let me put the word ‘good’ in place of the beautiful,” says Diotima.

¹⁶ *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 91.

¹⁷ *On the Sublime*, 120–1.

and thus absolutely is, according to Diotima, a “state of mind half-way between wisdom and ignorance”: “such a state of mind cannot be called understanding but can one call such a state of mind ignorance which hits upon the truth?” (80). This statement is of particular importance because it foreshadows later notions of the aesthetic, beginning with Aristotle’s and including Kant’s, that also emphasize this midway status between wisdom and ignorance. We should consider, then, whether the love of beauty and the desire to possess it “forever” is understandable in terms of an aesthetic/teleological “understanding” which is neither understanding nor ignorance but necessarily “midway” between the two as a result of contemplating things which are “eternal.”

As we shall see in the following two chapters on the *Critiques of Aesthetic* and *Teleological Judgments* respectively, Kant too rejects the notion that beauty and eternity are capable of understanding (*Verstand*), and he too insists that there is a middle which “cannot be called ignorance [as it] hits upon the truth.” This “hitting upon the truth,” rather than knowing it, is exactly how Kant describes reason (*Vernunft*) in general and, more specifically, the “aesthetic ideas” of the faculty of judgment (*Urteilkraft*) which combine reason with understanding.¹⁸ Might we not, then, refer these notions back to the *Symposium* and assert that the love of beauty which “hits upon the truth” but does not understand it, and which desires to possess eternally that which cannot be possessed even for a moment, is precisely the aesthetic as a realm of thought whose “aesthetic ideas” “induce much thought yet without the possibility of any definite concept” (Kant)? If so, then one might also point to one version of the Platonic concept of “philo-sophy,” that which asserts that we can “desire to know” but we cannot know, as pointing towards *art* as that which best embodies the truth, as best embodying the absolute which is, according to Plato, the highest form of truth. This view, however “counter-intuitive” to our understanding of Plato (as Tom Cohen and others have argued,¹⁹ there is much in Plato that is ultimately “counter-intuitive”), is supported by Irigary’s reading of the *Symposium*, although she is more interested in redeeming erotic love and beauty than art as essential, and not merely ancillary, to philosophy and of the absolute truth which is its goal:

But, contrary to the usual dialectical methods, love ought not to be abandoned for the sake of becoming wise or learned. It is love that leads to knowledge—both

¹⁸ “The Faculties of the Mind Which Constitute Genius,” *The Critique of Judgment*, 175ff.

¹⁹ *Anti-Mimesis*.

practical and metaphysical. It is love that is both the guide and the way, above all a mediator.²⁰

Of course, the other version of the Platonic concept of philosophy, one shared (as we will argue) by Hegel, would assert that the “love of knowledge” or “desire to know” does not mean forsaking the realm of understanding and its clear and distinct (and non-aesthetic) ideas, and that the aesthetic must be condemned, as rhetoric is condemned, as anathema to the truth. I hope to establish in this Preface that it is the former version of beauty as an aesthetic truth or, in Kantian terms, as an “aesthetic idea” that links it to the absolute that is evident in Diotima’s speech, despite all the evidence, and readings, to the contrary.

Just as love loves beauty because it lacks the desired object beauty affords, so too it loves, and lacks, the truth to which it is also attracted in the beautiful. This is because love “interprets and conveys messages to the gods from men and to men from the gods ... but God does not deal directly with man.” This description of love is surprising, for it seems to describe the god Hermes who, as the “founder” of herme-neutics, was responsible for translating between an otherwise incomprehensible divine understanding and mere mortal reasoning. And yet this description is in keeping with our analysis of love in the *Symposium* as leading to hermeneutics, which is based in the interpretation of god or the absolute but which also includes the interpretation of beautiful works of art. This desire to know the work of art produces “aesthetic ideas” which, according to Kant, do not literally understand beauty but do afford us, like the glimpse of the beautiful itself, a “passing” trope of an eternal truth which can never be understood as such. Thus we understand Diotima’s insistence that love, the desire for the beautiful and its truth, cannot itself be either beautiful or true as a reference to the truth of aesthetic understanding which, as explicitly formulated by Schelling,²¹ is always denied by the very object it attempts to know.

Much analysis/interpretation of the *Symposium* concerns itself with this in-between-ness—this *metaxu*—of the daimonic without consideration of what this ultimately means for the human understanding that is responsible for both the human *and* the divine. Aesthetic understanding is a hermeneutical process of translating beauty into a language we can understand and in which, like any translation, the beauty of the original is lost. Again, I would suggest that it is

²⁰ “Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima’s Speech.” 33.

²¹ “This double unity of every idea is actually the mystery by which the particular can be comprehended both within the absolute and, in spite of this, also as a particular.” *The Philosophy of Art* 35.

possible to read the *Symposium* against the grain of the accepted “Platonist” reading as a pre-Kantian defense of an aesthetic absolute in which “knowledge” of beauty transcends the understanding, which “denies itself as such” or, in Žižek’s words, “posits itself as grounded in and simultaneously different from” itself.²² Such aesthetic “knowledge” is always beyond or “beyond beyond,” but is also fully present in a work of art (and beauty) that is never capable of being known as such:

The dialectic of Diotima is in four terms, at least; the here, the two poles of the meeting, the beyond, but a beyond which never abolishes the here. And so on, indefinitely. The mediator is never abolished in an infallible knowledge. Everything is always in movement, in becoming. And the mediator of everything is, among other things, or exemplarily, love. Never completed, always evolving.²³

Although Diotima tries to dismiss the identification of the higher forms of love with their “lower,” more sensual counterparts as a sort of synecdochal error (“the truth is that we isolate a particular kind of love and appropriate for it the name of love, which really belongs to a wider whole” [84]), “the truth is,” as this ambiguous quote also shows, that Diotima remains faithful to the erotic component of love as underlying all “higher truths.” According to Freud’s own “Aristophanean” theory of primary narcissism and its derivatives,²⁴ “romantic love” is itself only a part—although obviously a very large part—of a more general model of happiness involving the return of narcissistic “oneness” in such things as fame, wealth, success, etc. And so we might even agree with Diotima’s statement that sensual love “really belongs to a larger whole” provided we understand that this larger whole is not the non-sensual, non-erotic realm of love of country, family, etc., but rather the “larger whole” of narcissistic omnipotent “oneness” in its many repressed, sublimated forms, including those of art and religion: “Such ideas have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man.”²⁵

Just as Plato/Diotima/Socrates do not really leave the sensual in turning to the higher forms of love, it is also not the case that the aesthetic love of beauty

²² The first quotation is from *The Critical Double*, the second from *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, 35.

²³ Irigaray, “Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato’s *Symposium*,” 33.

²⁴ Although I am referring more generally to Freud’s theory of a desired return to the state of “oneness” in “primary narcissism,” Freud also speaks approvingly of Aristophanes and his particular theory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. (GW, XIII, 62–3).

²⁵ “On the Uncanny,” *Writings on Art and Literature*, 211.

ceases to be relevant among these higher forms, even (as we shall see) in the final stage of absolute truth with which Diotima's speech ends. For if love is always, according to Diotima, motivated by the desire for the happiness which results from the possession of beauty, art and the aesthetic are similarly marked by a "pleasure principle" without which art would not exist. Moreover, like the sensual desire of love, aesthetic pleasure is similarly produced by the return to a state of "narcissistic oneness" in which, according to Freud, fantasies of heroic greatness, beautiful idealized forms, etc., all deny the harsher reality of a world marked by its separateness from our desires. As Sarah Kofman writes: "The relation between art and narcissism is fundamental."²⁶ In a word, the aesthetic love of beauty will be shown to be as much a part of the higher forms of "love," including the highest form of love, the absolute, as it is of sensual desire.

Indeed, the continued relevance of the "lower" forms of beauty to the higher is evident in Diotima's ambivalent appropriation of Aristophanes' theory. Although Diotima appears to reject Aristophanes' speech when she says that

There is indeed a theory that lovers are people who are in search of the other half of themselves, but according to my view of the matter love is not desire either of the half or of the whole unless that half or whole happens to be good. (85)

Diotima is here merely adjusting Aristophanes' theory by pointing out that the love of one's "significant other" is a desire to possess only what is good. But although Aristophanes' point was that the "other half" of one's original wholeness is not necessarily either good or beautiful, the similarities between the two theories, and their similar emphasis on perpetually possessing what is lacking in oneself, are more important than this difference. For Diotima's continued reliance on the notion of love as the desire for the "whole which happens to be good" confirms that we are still dealing with a theory of love as the desire for an original oneness that joins, ultimately, the "primitive" sensual love of beauty to the absolute truth towards which Diotima's speech is leading.

Because love not only loves beauty but desires to possess it, and does not only desire to possess it but desires to possess it eternally, the real object of love, according to Diotima, is neither love nor beauty but immortality. In what is surely one of the most ingenious—and amusing—proofs in the history of rhetorical argumentation Diotima points to the desire for procreation as evidence of the higher desire for immortality underlying love²⁷:

²⁶ *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freud's Aesthetics*, 119.

²⁷ Scott and Welton (*Erotic Wisdom: Philosophy and Intermediacy in Plato's Symposium*) concur that:

and mortal nature seeks, as far as may be, to perpetuate itself and become immortal. The only way in which it can achieve this is by procreation, which secures the perpetual replacement of an old member of the race by a new. (88)

Referring to the fact that heterosexual love culminates in an act of reproduction Diotima uses this as proof that love is a desire for immortality insofar as the result of sexual desire is the creation of a new generation which will, presumably, generate further generations, *ad infinitum*. (Homosexual love will fare even better in decoupling procreation from this literal embodiment.) Love, and the love of beauty which propels it, is not just immortal because one loves a perfection and wholeness which is inherently lacking in the individual but also because it involves, quite literally, the production of one's own immortality through procreation. In either case, immortality is the essence of love and, also in either case, this desire for immortality is plainly modeled on an original state of non-differentiated narcissistic oneness referred to earlier which Freud, in his seminal essay on art ("The Poet and Daydreaming"), equates with both the production as well as the appeal of art.²⁸

In emphasizing the desire for immortality as the essence of the love of beauty Diotima is not removing love from the realm of the aesthetic any more than she is removing it from the realm of sexual desire; indeed, to point to the desire for immortality, rather than beauty, as the essence of the aesthetic will serve in the end to clarify the relation of the aesthetic to the absolute, for it is precisely the link between beauty and immortality which will serve to correct Diotima's attempt to sever the aesthetic from a supersensible absolute which is impossible without it. Despite Plato's effort to lead the love of beauty away from the erotic and the aesthetic when discussing other ways in which the desire for immortality manifests itself, the vision of the absolute with which Diotima concludes her speech is hardly lacking in either. (The riotous appearance of Alcibiades would be another example of the "return of the repressed" in the *Symposium*, and elsewhere in Plato.)

Having redefined the love of beauty as a desire for immortality which is already present in the sexual desire for procreation Diotima is then able to elevate other instances of this desire over the aesthetic, erotic ones. For example,

"Reproduction is the way that mortals can partake of immortality" (123); but fail to note any irony or rhetoric in this notion, which is perhaps due to the rather solemn tone taken throughout Diotima's speech, as opposed to those which preceded it. Still, the idea that one is partaking of immortality through intercourse in any conscious way seems laughable at best.

²⁸ *Collected Papers*, vol. IV.

Diotima points to the “desire for immortal renown and a glorious reputation” as inspiring lawmakers, statesmen, and others who “procreate” laws and other objects of their own immortal desires. Among those who try to achieve such fame is the lawmaker Lycurgos, whom Diotima singles out for special praise in this regard. But, in the context of this “drinking party” and its discussion of *eros*, Plato’s Greek audience might well have smiled at this reference to Lycurgos of Sparta, given one of the most famous myths associated with the god Dionysus concerning Lycurgos of Thrace, the archetype of those rulers who, like Pentheus, tragically tried to control Dionysus’ licentiousness by controlling it through strict adherence to the rational laws of the state (Creon, in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, is another good example of this type). But, whether the example was meant to serve as a gentle reminder of the ultimate triumph of the sensual over reason or not, it serves as a reminder here that the privileging of the “procreation” of laws, etc. over the erotic and the aesthetic may be potentially overwhelmed by the more literal forms of love and desire which Dionysus represents, as happens with the appearance of the noted Dionysian Alcibiades at the end of the dialogue.

Inserted rather oddly into the otherwise coherent discussion of procreation as the love of immortality is a discussion of Plato’s theory of recollection (88–9). According to this version of the theory humans remember and thereby stabilize and preserve knowledge in a way that gives knowledge the “spurious appearance of uninterrupted identity.” Although spurious because in fact changing, the appearance of “uninterrupted identity” nonetheless “enables the mortal to partake of immortality”; that is, it is a “being” which is in reality a “becoming” even though it appears to transcend the transitory “ordinary” world of becoming. The divine world of “Being” which is described only in the final, climactic moments of Diotima’s speech is thus separate from the world of knowledge of beings but not, I would argue, from the realm of “aesthetic,” non-empirical ideas manifested in art. For the “spurious appearance of uninterrupted identity” which characterizes human knowledge (Kant’s *Verstand*) is precisely what is denied by the “aesthetic ideas” of art’s “merely” figurative truths. The aesthetic thus becomes the more proper vehicle for the expression of absolute being in that it expresses its meaning in the forms of figurative “aesthetic ideas” which do not “preserve their identity” but rather use those ideas to refer to an absolute truth whose aesthetic beauty is indistinguishable from what is later described by Diotima as the highest form of beauty, absolute truth. To be sure, Plato did not perceive art or the aesthetic as such in this

way, but, then again, Plato—or at least Socrates—did not understand Diotima, and his vision of the absolute in which Diotima’s speech culminates turns out to be identical with the realm of art and the aesthetic which Plato otherwise disdained.

Despite its odd insertion into Diotima’s speech, the discussion of recollection is thus linked to that of procreation by virtue of their common connection to the larger issue of immortality, or the absolute. For, just as procreation is the result of desiring to possess beauty forever, anamnesis is the desire to know a truth which is immortal, and unchanging. The supposedly unchanging Platonic “ideas” mimic the immortal truth in trying to remain the same, but Diotima points out the danger of believing in the stability of these “spurious” notions rather than in a process of change which “recollects” the immortal truth of which the ideas are merely mortal. It is worth noting the resemblance here of Diotima’s theory of remembrance to Nietzsche’s theory of “remembering the truth of an illusion we have forgotten is an illusion” in his seminal essay, “On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense.” For “extra-moral” one need only substitute “extra-mortal” for the two theories to converge in their critique of human knowledge as a false truth which, in preserving meaning for the sake of human knowledge, forgets a higher, more absolute truth which is less bounded by our own self-interest: “Only by means of forgetfulness can man ever arrive at imagining that he possesses truth ...”²⁹

Nietzsche’s urging us to forget to remember and to remember to forget, that is, to transcend the egotistical limitations of knowledge, is rarely if ever read in the context of Diotima’s similar urging in the *Symposium*. But I would argue that the Nietzschean side of Diotima’s speech is precisely what will lead her—and us—to reconsider the Platonic ‘extra-mortal Truth’ in the sort of aesthetic terms which, at least in the 1870’s, Nietzsche upheld as the highest truth.

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In beginning the final part of her speech Diotima distinguishes her “revelation” from everything which had preceded it:

So far, Socrates, I have dealt with love-mysteries into which even you could probably be initiated, but whether you could grasp the perfect revelation to which they lead the pilgrim if he does not stray from the right path, I do not

²⁹ “Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *Philosophy and Truth*, trans. Breazeale, 90.

know. However, you shall not fail for any lack of willingness on my part: I will tell you of it, and do try to follow if you can. (92)

Although the preceding discussion of love's pursuit of beauty is here deemed relevant to this final revelation in its more implicit manifestation of this ultimate goal, Diotima will now deal directly with the absolute as such rather than the absolute as it informs contingent forms such as erotic love, procreation as a way of becoming immortal, the creation of just laws, and even knowledge itself. It is worth noting that, in the passage just quoted, Diotima treats Socrates as someone who only *may* have understood the preceding discussion, and who only *may* be able to follow the subsequent one. We might, of course, write this off as Plato/Socrates' typically ironic self-effacement, but, as Lacan and other commentators have pointed out, this is also due to the difference between the sort of dialectical reasoning of which Socrates is the master and the very different sort of discussion one must have about absolute, un-conditioned beauty/truth "in itself." For, the *hypo-keimenon*, the sub-stance underlying appearance, will always be different from reality "for us" just as, according to Kant, God or freedom or the infinite are unknowable as such. Which is why the aesthetic truth in art, which Kant also links to this underlying sense of things, is similarly free from our attempts to know it, and similarly separate from the realm of logical understanding of which Socrates is master. As Stanley Rosen notes: "Man can never be whole, well, or wise without a vision of the unity which expresses itself as diversity. But as a result of that expression of diversity, he can never entirely obtain such a vision, and certainly not by a repudiation of diversity."³⁰ One could say, then, that Diotima's doubt about Socrates' ability to follow her discussion of the absolute is due to Socrates' (and Plato's) celebrated disdain for an artistic truth for which, as Kant's third *Critique* repeatedly argues (see the following two chapters), the terms of "understanding" are decidedly different, and that the necessary relation of understanding to this "higher" truth is represented by Plato's own metonymic attraction to an understanding that is precluded by his own attempts at understanding. In this sense, one should interpret the oft-debated appearance of Alcibiades as a similar disruption by an aesthetic truth which is always other—including, to paraphrase Protagoras,³¹ other than that which it is other than.

³⁰ "Socrates and Diotima," *Plato's Symposium*.

³¹ "On every truth there are two opposing statements—including this one." Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, A1, A20.

From love of the beauty of a particular person one moves to a love of physical beauty in general, and it is this generalized love of the physical which then leads, by virtue of its separation from such concrete particulars, to a love of the spiritual beauty of, say, a person's character rather than a love of the physical person: "When he encounters a virtuous soul in a body which has little of the bloom of beauty, he will be content to love and cherish it" (92). This progression will further lead not only to the love of the beauty of ideas but, ultimately, to the love of ideas in themselves—sc. philosophical, self-referential ideas from which not just sensuous but even ideal particulars have been distilled. Because the "road to the absolute" begins with this important, but highly questionable, shift from love of the particular person to love of people in general, it is worth pausing to consider this more carefully here.

One does not need to invoke Nietzsche's celebrated "reversal of Platonism" to question Diotima's notion that the love of a particular form of beauty will lead, naturally and inevitably, to a love of beauty in general when it is observed that there are many other individual instances of such particular forms of beauty. The obvious weakness of this argument is the notion that, if there are other particular forms of beauty, we will cease to love the same or—as Don Juan proudly declares—another particular form of beauty:

No, no; constancy is good only for nincompoops. Every beautiful woman has the right to charm us, and the advantage of having been the first one we met must not rob the others of the just claims they all have on our hearts ... after all, budding inclinations have unaccountable charms, and the whole pleasure of love lies in change.³²

Indeed, the argument is so unconvincing (as Martha Nussbaum notes: "These proposals are so bold as to be pretty well incomprehensible, from the ordinary point of view"³³) that one would wonder why it existed at all if it were not part of what is by now a widely recognized bias of Platonic philosophy—that the particular is always inferior to the universal—which is so "hard wired" into our thinking that we always already assume it to be true (cf. Plato's disdain for rhetoric, and his assumption that poets like Agathon don't know what they are talking about).

³² *Don Juan*, in *Tartuffe and other Plays*, 322.

³³ *Love's Knowledge*, 116. Nussbaum adds, regarding this strange idea of substitutability, that "the wide sea of the *Kalon* is beyond us" (117), although she is less quick to ridicule the idea than I am here. I am suggesting, however, that the idea is present in works of art, which are indeed "commensurable" and "substitutable" in the way that Diotima demands.

But, if the universal is not always preferable to the particular, particularly in matters of love and beauty, does this mean that the subsequent movement to include other “spiritual” forms of beauty, such as the philosophical love of the beauty of ideas and the aesthetic love of the beauty of art and nature, cease to exist? Yes and no; yes in the sense that there is not a progression “upwards” which leaves the “lower” stages of love and beauty, such as the love of a particular beautiful person or object, behind. “No” in the sense that love of the beauty of a particular person or object is indeed de-particularized along the lines of Diotima’s stricture in what Kant will refer to as the necessarily “universal” essence of all art (the “Second Moment” of the “Analytic of the Beautiful”). As we learn from Kant, it is in art that the philosophical beauty of truth “in itself” is the same “marvelous beauty” *which is only perceived “suddenly” (exaiphnês)* that exists in both particulars and universals, and the same beauty which motivates the contemplation of the absolute. I would like to think of this latter argument for an early version of Kant’s “subjective universality” as Diotima’s argument—as the argument of the feminine, non-exclusionary side of Socrates/Plato—whereas the attempt to disregard particular forms of beauty should be attributed to “Plato,” and itself disregarded. Or, perhaps one should view the curious, convoluted relationship between Diotima and Socrates, as Lacan does,³⁴ as one of Aristophanes’ original, androgynous hybrids, the very personification of Kant’s own notion of the aesthetic as the synthesis of two generically different (understanding/reason, *Verstand/Vernunft*) but ultimately related ways of thinking.³⁵

In the final stage of her/his speech Diotima turns to the ultimate goal of all knowledge and the ultimate manifestation of all beauty, the absolute “thing-in-itself” which had only been mimicked in earthly pursuits of knowledge and beauty. And yet Diotima does not retreat from the identification of this absolute with the aesthetic when she refers to it as “a *beauty* whose nature is marvelous indeed” [*ti thaumaston ten phusin kalon*] (93). Indeed, it will be our contention

³⁴ “By a singular dividing up it is perhaps the woman, the woman who is in him I said, that Socrates from a certain moment allows to speak.” Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Seminar IX, 1.

³⁵ In her essay on “Female Imagery in Plato,” Angela Hobbs raises the important question of gender in the dialogue, particularly with regard to the “genderless” goal of philosophical truth. Given the repeated, and apparently irreversible, male/female paradigm of the pursuit of the absolute (cf. Schiller’s “The Veiled Statue at Sais”), such gendering—or is it ungendering?—is of critical importance. To wit, and as another of the essays included in this fine volume points out, the poet Shelley, who translated the *Symposium*, conceived of truth as a veiled woman who also represented his own ideal self. David K. O’Connor, “Platonic Selves and Shelley and Stevens.”

that the description of the absolute here in the final “revelatory” section of Diotima’s speech describes not only a rational philosophical ideal but the aesthetic absolute as a truth, which is always separate from itself, always veiled, intermediary and, as Irigary describes it, “demonic” in conveying a truth which is beyond our knowledge:

if love possessed all that he desired, he would desire no more. He must lack, therefore, in order to desire still. But, if love had nothing at all to do with beautiful and good things, he could not desire them either. Thus he is an intermediary ... Love is a demon—his function is to transmit to the gods what comes from men and to men what comes from the gods.³⁶

The first characteristic of absolute beauty is that such beauty is “first of all eternal, for it neither waxes nor wanes” (93). The notion of eternity here follows from the earlier descriptions of beauty as a desire for a perfect wholeness which is desired “forever” and also seen in the attraction to procreation, perfect ideas, perfect laws, etc. Yet such perfection, by Diotima’s own account, is not to be found experientially, not even in the world of Ideas which continue to be contaminated by the particulars to which they refer. Where, then, outside of the discussion of such a metaphysical notion of Parmenidean One-ness, is such perfection to be found?

In art. For it is there that, according to Aristotle, we find the notion of perfection as that which neither waxes nor wanes, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away:

The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole.³⁷

Moreover, in referring to the absolute as beauty “which neither waxes nor wanes,” Diotima is emphasizing the fact that the notion of beauty, which is the cause and not the effect of love and with which the ascent to the highest spheres of truth begins, is never left behind. “Truth *is* beauty, and beauty *is* truth,” and the mistake, which will not be corrected philosophically until Kant, is in failing to interpret this as a statement of the link between aesthetics and the absolute,

³⁶ Irigary, “Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato’s *Symposium*,” 34.

³⁷ *Poetics*, trans. Bywater, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 1463.

and as a statement of the metaphysical essence of aesthetic beauty, or art in general.

Yet, even if it is possible to relate the eternal beauty which “neither waxes nor wanes” to the aesthetics of a beautiful that is canonically perfect, what about Diotima’s subsequent statement that:

Nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatever; *he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal (auto kath’ hauto meth’ hautou monoides aei on).* (93–4, emphasis mine)

Is this not, as it is often taken to be, a blanket denunciation of any appearance of the absolute, of any phenomenal manifestation of “a beauty which is marvelous indeed”? Not necessarily. If one reads the passage carefully, it is clear that Diotima is making sure that we do not confuse the absolute with such “corporeal” referents as the physical manifestation of “the beauty of a face or hand.” If one pictures the beauty of a face or hands in Greek sculpture or of an old pair of boots in van Gogh one could argue, as Kant was later to maintain, that such aesthetic beauty is never to be confused with the real object it purports to describe. So-called “disinterestedness” refers to the difference between objective reality and a work of art, which is why Kant would distinguish between the corporeal face in reality—exactly as Diotima does—and the beautiful face in a work of art—exactly as Diotima does not—which is never the face or hands as such but rather the face or hands as an expression of something other, a “something other” which—as we shall see in the following two chapters—is nothing other than the constant utter of the supersensible.

“Nor,” continues Diotima, is absolute beauty “like the beauty of a thought or of a science.” No particular “beautiful” thought, stated as such or proven and thus “scientific,” is absolute beauty. Would this preclude, then, “beautiful thoughts” such as they occur in poetry, and/or in the interpretation of same? What Diotima is excluding here, I would maintain, is the objectivity (“of a science”) of any logical statement or idea. (“New Critics” such as I. A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks were to argue much the same thing in the early twentieth century.³⁸) But is it not possible that a “poetic idea,” or what Kant would call

³⁸ See, for example, Brooks’s “The Language of Paradox,” in *The Well-Wrought Urn*.

an “aesthetic idea,”³⁹ is absolute precisely because it is not a particular thought, scientific law, Platonic idea, etc.? An example of such a “beautiful thought” is the “most sublime” example of such aesthetic ideas provided by Kant in his third *Critique*, that of the “veil of Isis”:

Perhaps there has never been a more sublime utterance, or a thought more sublimely expressed, than the well-known inscription upon the Temple of Isis (Mother *Nature*): ‘I am all that is, and that was, and that shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from before my face.’ *Segner* made use of this idea in a suggestive vignette on the frontispiece of his *Natural Philosophy*, in order to inspire his pupil at the threshold of that temple into which he was about to lead him with such a holy awe as would dispose his mind (*Gemüt*) to serious attention. (fn.#49, 252–3/179, emphasis mine)

Isis’ statement “I am all that is, and that was, and that shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from before my face” is a comment on the absolute “thing-in-itself”⁴⁰ as that which is always veiled by some kind of concept of its own conceptuallessness (Lacan refers this to the “metonymical function of all desire”⁴¹), some kind of concept which is thus a figure of speech, a catachresis if you will, of that for which there is no literal statement. Although he doesn’t relate this conundrum to figuration, Stanley Rosen reaches the same conclusion in different terms when he notes that: “Man can never be whole, well, or wise without a vision of the unity which expresses itself as diversity. But as a result of that expression of diversity, he can never entirely obtain such a vision, and certainly not by a repudiation of diversity” (201). Other aesthetic ideas, such as Kant’s example of the setting sun in Fredrick’s poem about the death of a “noble soul,” are similar in expressing the unexpressible even when the unexpressible as such, the absolute, is not their specific referent:

Such representations of the imagination may be termed ideas. This is partly because they at least strain after something lying out beyond the confines of

³⁹ *Critique of Judgment*, #49, “The Faculties of the Mind that Constitute Genius.”

⁴⁰ In his discussion of Diotima’s description of the absolute Stanley Rosen quotes a passage from the *Timaeus* which closely resembles the statement of the veiled Isis so beloved by Kant and others:

For we say that *ousia* was, is, and will be; but “is” alone (*to estin monon*) belongs to it according to the true logos ... But that which possesses the same state forever immovably cannot properly become older or younger through time ... (218)

This Greek notion of *ousia* should stand as an important corrective to the Isis statement, for it adds the fact that that which “is and was and forever will be” also never “is or was or forever will be” but, rather, exists outside time altogether and, thus, in time, like the work of art.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Seminar IX, 131.

experience, and so seek to approximate to a presentation of rational concepts, thus giving to these concepts the semblance of an objective reality. But, on the other hand, there is this most important reason, that no concept can be wholly adequate to them as internal intuitions. The poet essays the task of interpreting to sense the rational ideas of invisible beings ...⁴²

A beautiful thought, then, is not a concept as long as it is a figurative, “aesthetic idea,” and thus not susceptible to Diotima’s rejection of particular beautiful forms or ideas as incapable of expressing the absolute. Moreover, one could argue that there is no way to express the absolute other than through such figurative “aesthetic ideas” and, conversely, that such aesthetic ideas have no other object than what I am referring to here as the “aesthetic absolute.” Although it is not to such aesthetic ideas that Diotima is referring in her speech about “seeing the absolute,” it is such aesthetic ideas alone—such as the aesthetic idea of Diotima herself as the real/unreal double of Socrates, and the aesthetic idea of her mythic discourse—that can express the inexpressible absolute of beauty to which Diotima is referring.

The one who sees behind the “veil of Isis” to the absolute “will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal” (93–4). As Rosen notes, “In the *Symposium* the beautiful is described in visual terms” (270), but one might well wonder what Diotima means by “seeing” (*kat’opsetai*) the absolute as “existing” in the way she describes. The notion of seeing the absolute is repeated numerous times in this section, e.g. 95: “What may we suppose to be the felicity of the one who *sees* (*idein*) absolute beauty in its essence, pure and unalloyed?”, and is repeated in Kant’s and Schiller’s⁴³ example of lifting the veil of Isis to see (*sehen*) the absolute. (Although, it should be added, Kant, unlike Schiller, is only interested in the *idea* of seeing the absolute.) Nor does it resolve matters to change the Platonic verb to its cognate “knowing” (*eidein*) the absolute, because there would then be a similar problem of knowing something which one cannot know any more than one can see it. In both cases, then, “seeing” the absolute is a necessary veil—either metaphoric or, as Lacan and de Man describe it, metonymic, but in either case figurative and thus aesthetic—which cannot be lifted even when one attempts to enunciate, as Plato does here, what one sees when one lifts the veil of knowing. *Thus, Diotima’s attempt to claim otherwise, to claim that one can see the absolute alone with itself, reveals the absolute to be incapable*

⁴² *The Critique of Judgment*, 176.

⁴³ “The Veiled Statue at Sais,” *Schiller’s Works*, vol. IV.

of anything other than an aesthetic, mythic manifestation. Diotima's description of seeing the absolute is thus, like Diotima herself, and like her own relation to Socrates and Socrates' own relation to Plato, a necessary fiction that reveals (or, one might say, re-veils) the truth catachrestically in forms or tropes in which it is not.⁴⁴

"When a man begins to catch sight of that physical beauty [of boys]," Diotima says in summarizing her speech about the progression towards the absolute:

he is *very near* his goal [*otan dê tis apo tôn de dia to orthôs paiderastein epaniôn ekeino to kalon archetai kathorn, schedon an ti haptito tou telous*]. This is the right way of approaching or being initiated into the mysteries of love, to begin with examples of beauty in this world, and using them as steps to ascend continually with that absolute beauty as one's aim, from one instance of physical beauty to two and from two to all, then from physical beauty to moral beauty, and from moral beauty to the beauty of knowledge, until from knowledge of various kinds one arrives at the supreme knowledge whose sole object is that absolute beauty, and knows at last what absolute beauty is [*kai gnô auto teleutôn ho estî kalon*]. (94)

We should move, according to Diotima, from examples of physical beauty and from "knowledge of various kinds" to "the supreme knowledge whose sole object is that absolute beauty." It is worth noting that, despite the famous "ladder" of success leading from the first rung to the last, the first is described as being "very near" to its goal. And, similarly, where is this supreme knowledge to be found outside of Diotima's (and others') own discussion of it, a discussion which is indeed "very near" and which, as we and others have pointed out, is as fictional as the "most sublime utterance" of the veiled Isis to which it bears its own uncanny resemblance? (The question of gender in these repeated manifestations of the "veiled Isis" paradigm, including Diotima's, is obviously of paramount importance and will be noted throughout this work, and in the final discussion of Nietzsche's critique of the veil of Isis.) One might argue that metaphysics is traditionally ascribed the place where such supreme knowledge is to be found, but is that really the place of that "supreme knowledge whose sole object is absolute *beauty*" given the fact that metaphysics has itself become a

⁴⁴ In Lacan's discussion of transference in the *Symposium* (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VIII. *Transference*, 1960–1), he notes the important idea of the *agalma* as the charming object contained within an ugly exterior, an idea that is clearly relevant to all the outside/inside frames of the dialogue, including (especially) the "excluded" figure of Alcibiades who exists outside the dialogue proper only to destroy it, who exists as the beautiful object contained within the ugly, Silenian exterior of Socrates, etc.

highly dubious, if not non-existent species of most philosophical inquiries after Hegel (and even earlier if one excludes theological inquiries)? I would argue that, if absolute beauty is the “sole object” in question, then one should, indeed one must, look to art and the aesthetic rather than metaphysics *proper* as the sole realm where such absolute beauty is to be found.

Although a more detailed defense of this idea of the aesthetic absolute is to be found in the subsequent chapters of this book, one would point here to Diotima’s notion that beauty is ultimately only beauty because it is linked to the absolute. If we have not tended to discuss beauty this way but rather as something empirical that is because the very association with art and the absolute, art and metaphysics, that is evident in the *Symposium* is also denied by a Platonic schema that would preclude any particular “object” from such consideration. And so it is a particularly ironic twist of fate that Plato’s *Symposium*, in which the notion of absolute beauty is given its most extensive pre-modern exposition, is also the place where art and the aesthetic are effectively eliminated from the very discussion of which they provide the “sole object.”

In the final lines of her speech Diotima reiterates that the *sight* of the absolute is the sight of “something” essential which is not “tainted by human flesh and colour and a mass of perishable rubbish” (95). Irigary argues that this immortal truth is a “*sensible* transcendental, the *material* texture of beauty,”⁴⁵ (emphasis mine) but I would add to this that what is being described here is also an artistic representation which, by its very nature, is not such “perishable rubbish.” Seeing this beauty “with the faculty capable of seeing it” means, in aesthetic terms, seeing the artwork with the faculty capable of seeing it; that is, seeing the work differently than one sees ordinary objects by attending to its inherent separation from the object which it mimetically represents. Art thus represents the solution to the problem which Stanley Rosen repeatedly notes in his book-length study of the *Symposium*, namely, that “there is nothing in this [Diotima’s] brief description of beauty in itself which renders it in a realm altogether separate from its appearances to man,” and that:

We should not overlook the fact that throughout her [final] speech Diotima never calls this kind of beauty an Idea ... but the fact that it cannot be “pictured” as a body does not mean that it does not “appear” at all. On the contrary, the beautiful, despite its uniqueness, is visible in its uniqueness.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Plato’s *Symposium*, 43.

⁴⁶ Plato’s *Symposium*, 271–2.

The one who sees the absolute, unconditioned as it must be by any reality, “will be able to bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness but true goodness” (95). Although Diotima here substitutes the word “goodness” for beauty, as we noted before, Diotima equates the two: “Let me put the word “good” in place of the beautiful,” and so we are allowed to equate goodness with beauty—and art—in this sentence. The procreative process which Diotima discussed earlier thus continues here, for the gaze at absolute beauty produces more of the same. Although Plato is seemingly referring here to the philosophical pursuit of absolute truth, this can be interpreted as referring more readily to the artistic process whereby the creation of beautiful works of art produces those who, seeing their absolute beauty, must produce other original artworks that are “not mere reflected images” of beauty but absolute beauty. “And having brought forth and nurtured true goodness one will have the privilege of being beloved of god and becoming (if ever one can) immortal oneself” (95). Moriss Partee concludes his study of Plato’s tortured relationship to poetry with a reference to this same passage in the *Symposium*, concluding that, by failing to understand poetry Plato “shows us not a banquet of thought but a hunger.”⁴⁷ But, in listening to the final words of the mythic Diotima—and not to Plato or Socrates—we can hear her referring to the idea that to create a beautiful artwork, as Homer did, is to create something divine and absolute and so to be, “if ever one can, immortal oneself.”

⁴⁷ 206.

Kant I: *The Critique of Judgment*

It is ultimately with Kant that freedom as something inconceivable originates.
Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*¹

The relationship between art and the absolute proper begins with Kant, for it was he who first made explicit the relation of beauty, sublimity, and fine art² to the “supersensible” absolute (*das Übersinnliche*) that is our subject here. The focus of this “introduction” will be on Kant’s own Introduction to his *Critique*,³ in order to demonstrate that his entire understanding of aesthetic judgment is based on its relation to our “supersensible substrate” (*übersinnliches Substrat*). Although some of Kant’s critics have referred to this aesthetic/teleological foundation in passing, while the majority have ignored it, none have given this notion of the supersensible basis of aesthetic judgment its proper due. Although Kant is not as adamant in insisting on this precarious foundation as those who followed him (“What fascinated this new generation in the 3rd *Critique* was the metaphysical potential it seemed to suggest”⁴), for Kant, as for Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer and Hegel, fine art, when properly understood, only exists because of its relation to the absolute:

¹ 79.

² Although much has been made of whether the third *Critique* is about natural or artistic beauty (and sublimity)—indeed, Hegel makes Kant’s failure to distinguish the two a major criticism of Kant’s third *Critique*—I would argue that if we take the *Critique* seriously we must accept that, for Kant, the distinction is largely irrelevant. One really only need point to the numerous references to works of fine art (*schöne Kunst*) in the third *Critique* to settle the matter, e.g. section #46, “Fine Art is the art of genius.” For a defense of how the distinction is irrelevant and, indeed, injurious to a proper understanding of *The Critique of Judgment*, see Kemal’s *Kant and Fine Art*. One might also mention that for Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer the distinction is so obviously irrelevant that one must wonder at those who would insist upon it. Finally, John Zammito’s Kantian reference also seems definitive in this regard: “only in works of art can we become conscious of reason as the cause of objects,” *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, 155.

³ There is also another, posthumously published Introduction, the “Erste Fassung der Einleitung in die Kritik der Urteilskraft.” This earlier draft is discussed in David Martyn’s *Sublime Failures*, 150ff., a work whose notion of ‘sublime failure’ is compatible with the notion of an aesthetic absolute discussed here, and is included in the Pluhar edition/translation of the third *Critique*.

⁴ John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, 14.

There is a new reconfiguration of the role of art in wake of the so-called transcendental revolution of Kant in which original power passes into the immanence of subjectivity, and is most concretely incarnate in the great genius or original work of aesthetic greatness. *Instead of the death of art, there is a reconfiguration of the absoluteness of art in light of the perceived death of religion.* What seems to die in religion is being resurrected in art, thus reversing the kind of movement of death and resurrection we find in Hegel.⁵ (emphasis mine)

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The Introduction to Kant's third *Critique* is not only an introduction to the faculty of judgment (*Urteilskraft*), but also to its relation to the other two faculties of understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*), and so a certain understanding of these three faculties, both separately and in relation to one another, is necessary in order for us to understand Kant's notion of the "supersensible" which, consistent with Kant's first two *Critiques*, is a necessary component of reason and judgment only, i.e. to the exclusion of knowledge or understanding (*Verstand*). Reason as it is defined within Kant's tripartite schema is different from understanding, which is based on a knowledge of things as they exist in nature, but it is also different from the "precepts" of reason which are based on the empirical knowledge and practical skill of what works best in any given situation:

... the above (e.g. the art of social intercourse, the principle of dietics, or even general instruction as to the attainment of happiness) contain nothing more than rules of skill, which are thus only technically practical—the skill being directed to producing an effect which is possible according to natural concepts of causes and effects. As these concepts belong to theoretical philosophy they are subject to those precepts as mere corollaries of theoretical philosophy (i.e. as corollaries of natural science), *and so cannot claim any place in any special philosophy called practical.* (CJ 10, emphasis mine)

What Kant's notion of reason *does* have to do with is its separation, ironically, from such practical concerns and given conditions, and, indeed, with our freedom to act exclusive from such "pre-existent conditions." It is this freedom from empirical knowledge or otherwise objective grounds—thus making "practical reason" decidedly impractical!—that constitutes reason's inherent link with the supersensible:

⁵ William Desmond, "Art and the Absolute Revisited: The Neglect of Hegel's Aesthetics" in *Hegel and Aesthetics*, 4.

On the other hand the morally practical precepts, which are founded entirely on the concept of freedom, to the complete exclusion of grounds taken from nature for the determination of the will, form quite a special kind of precepts. These, too, like the rules obeyed by nature, are, without qualification, called laws, though they do not, like the latter, rest on sensible conditions, *but upon a supersensible principle*. (11, emphasis mine)

Kant is referring here to such higher “morally practical precepts” as the precept of “loving thy neighbor as thyself,” precepts which, according to Kant, are based not on anything practical or advantageous but, rather, on our freedom to act in accordance with higher moral principles which are entirely separate from such concerns. This is not the place to enter into the debate over whether such principles are really separate from such concerns. Rather, what is of critical importance to our discussion is Kant’s reference to reason’s freedom from the sensible and, therefore, its “supersensible principle.” Like the term “practical,” such “freedom” has nothing to do with our common conception of being able to do what one likes—a notion that is easily contradicted by the fact that doing what one likes can hardly be considered freedom *in strictu sensu*. Rather, reason’s freedom as it is understood by Kant refers to our undeniable separation, as humans, from ordinary, “practical” reality (including the reality of “what one likes”) and our link to the supersensible foundation on which such objectively knowable realities are based. Kant’s typical examples of this supersensible foundation—God, freedom, art, beauty (hence the notion of “disinterestedness”), sublimity and, of course, metaphysics itself—are not knowable in themselves but function, nonetheless, as the higher principles on which our more objective realities are based; as Kant says in the first *Critique*, “We cannot know, [yet] we can think things-in-themselves.”⁶ We cannot, as humans, be limited to any objective definitions, rules or principles of who or what we are as humans, despite the plethora of such definitions which are an undeniable part—indeed, are necessities—of real, everyday life. Which is why “Love Thy Neighbor” is, according to Kant, a moral as opposed to a technical “precept,” for it is a principle, not of reality, but of our separation from reality and of our deference to something higher that cannot be known as such to be true. If this principle is motivated solely by selfishness or, for that matter, anything practical in the ordinary sense of the word, it is not, as Kant frequently points out, a moral principle. It is also worth noting in this regard that the “Second Moment”

⁶ *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 27.

in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” in the third *Critique*, that which prescribes “subjective universality” to anything beautiful, is the supersensible basis which links art to a kind of morality—rather than any so-called morality (or lack thereof) contained within the artwork.⁷

This “supersensible principle” is not something we know, any more than we can know freedom without at the same time contradicting its very essence—thus, Nancy’s statement about Kant having first introduced the notion of freedom as incomprehensible quoted at the outset of this chapter. (As Schelling was to argue more explicitly, freedom must also be freedom from freedom itself.⁸) This “supersensible principle” of “higher” truths than what we know about ourselves is not mystical or self-contradictory, for to base all reality on the senses is to ignore—to be senseless to—not only the *a priori* conditions for such “sense data” but, more germane to our purpose here, the importance of theological or theo-teleo-logical questions about the origin and end of natures such as ours—the nature of the end of nature, if you will. Kant knew full well that such questions could never be answered, and that the supersensible could never be known, but he argued throughout all three *Critiques* that the *question* of the supersensible is as real and as important to our thinking, and to our ultimate reality as human beings, as the empirical is as real and important to our more contingent, daily lives.

Why, Kant wonders, are we divided against ourselves in this way, with part of us existing in a real, albeit contingent, world of objects which are known to us, and part of us existing in an absolute realm of freedom from all those contingencies which is not? Why is part of us fully capable of defining who we are—both personally as well as generically—and part of us lost in the greater mystery of who we really are—ultimately or, better, teleologically?

Still, how does it happen that these two different realms do not form one realm, seeing that, while they do not limit each other in their legislation, they continually do so in their effects in the sensible world? *The explanation lies in the fact that the concept of nature represents its objects in intuition doubtless, yet not as things-in-themselves*, but as mere phenomena, whereas the concept of freedom represents in its Object what is no doubt a thing-in-itself, but it does not make it intuitable, and further that neither the one nor the other is capable, therefore, of

⁷ For a spirited defense of this Kantian notion of *The Ethics of Reading*, see J. Hillis Miller (1989).

⁸ “For only what is free which acts according to the laws of its own inner being and is not determined by anything else either within it or outside it.” *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*, 63.

furnishing a theoretical cognition of its Object (or even of the thinking Subject) as a thing-in-itself, *or, as this would be, of the supersensible—the idea of which has certainly to be introduced as the basis of the possibility of all those objects of experience, although it cannot itself ever be elevated or extended into a cognition.*

Our entire cognitive faculty is therefore presented with an unbounded, but also inaccessible field—the field of the supersensible—in which we seek in vain for a territory, and on which, therefore, we can have no realm for theoretical cognition ... (13, emphasis mine)

“The concept of freedom represents in its Object what is no doubt a thing-in-itself, but it does not make it intuitable”: freedom is thus linked to the supersensible thing-in-itself just as the supersensible thing-in-itself is unthinkable without freedom, for the origin/end and, indeed, the very essence of every intuited, phenomenal object is separate—freed from—itself as an intuited, phenomenal object. It is an odd consequence of this, as Giorgio Agamben has noted,⁹ that animals are in a sense absolute “things-in-themselves” for the very reason that they are not, whereas humans, who are alone capable of thinking of themselves and of other inhabitants of the phenomenal world as things-in-themselves, are for this reason banished, as it were, from the very realm of their own thinking.

As a result of this “great gulf” and, at the same time, ultimate unity created between the thing and the thing-in-itself, between knowledge and reason, between necessity and freedom, it should be possible to create a bridge between the two, a bridge between an intuition that is known and a supersensible that is not, but is the essence of the former:

There must, therefore, be a ground of the unity of the supersensible that lies at the basis of nature, with what the concept of freedom contains in a practical way, and although the concept of this ground neither theoretically nor practically attains to a knowledge of it, and so has no peculiar realm of its own, still it renders possible the transition ... (14)

Rodolphe Gasché also uses this metaphor of the bridge to explain the relationship between the known and the unknown in the third *Critique* and, indeed, the relationship between the first two *Critiques* and the third *Critique*:

Since Kant conceived of the Third *Critique* as a bridge between theoretical and practical reason, causality and freedom, nature and morality, which he held to

⁹ *The Open: Man and Animal.*

be separated by an abyss, the question of how reflective [aesthetic] judgment manages to bridge the chasm in question is central ...¹⁰

The name of this bridge which, paradoxically, provides the aforementioned “unity” with a supersensible that can never be unified outside of a divine absolute such as that of Spinoza,¹¹ is judgment (*Urteilkraft*), and one of the particular (or one might say, following the translator’s felicitous usage, “peculiar”) beings crossing this “bridge,” is art. It is the supersensible foundation of art which explains other, more widely acknowledged, ideas in Kant’s treatise (“disinterestedness,” “subjective finality,” “aesthetic ideas,” etc.), and from which the existence of beauty, sublimity and fine art, all derive.

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While such explicit references to the absolute drop out of Kant’s discussion in this Introduction until its ninth and final section, references to the related notions of “finality” and “subjective finality” dominate the entire intervening discourse. Given the fact that the faculty of judgment forms a bridge or middle ground between an objectivity that is known and a free subjectivity—reason—that is not, judgments rendered by this faculty are of two kinds: *determinate* (*bestimmend*) *judgment* that, while not objective determinations in the manner that understanding knows its objects logically or scientifically, nonetheless applies its theoretical knowledge to some external content that is thereby subsumed and adequately rendered to its understanding, and *reflective* (*reflektierend*) *judgment* which proceeds from the other side of the aforementioned “bridge” in calling forth an understanding that is not capable of adequately rendering its object to our understanding. Whereas, in determinate judgments, the object in question is subsumed by our understanding, in reflective judgments the understanding is subsumed by the “object” in question:

The reflective judgement, which is compelled to ascend from the particular in nature to the universal, stands, therefore, in need of a principle ... Now the principle sought can only be this: as universal laws of nature have their ground in our understanding, which prescribes them to nature (though only according to

¹⁰ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics*, 7.

¹¹ Despite Spinoza’s enormous influence on the Idealists, owing, I would argue, to his insistence on viewing everything as absolute when properly understood, Spinoza did not privilege the work of art in this regard. This is, perhaps, what led Errol Harris to state that Kant had “no theoretical bridge to the real world of things in themselves” (*The Substance of Spinoza*, 195).

the universal concept of it as nature), particular empirical laws must be regarded, in respect of that which is left undetermined in them by these universal laws [sc. the “manifold forms of nature, so many modifications of the universal transcendental concepts of nature left undetermined by the laws furnished by pure understanding a priori” mentioned earlier], *according to a unity such as they would have if an understanding (though it be not ours) had supplied them for the benefit of our cognitive faculties*, so as to render possible a system of experience according to particular natural laws. This is not to be taken as implying that such an understanding must be actually assumed, (for it is only the reflective judgment which avails itself of this idea as a principle for the purpose of reflection and not for determining anything); but this faculty rather gives by this means a law to itself alone and not to nature. (18–19, emphasis mine)

What, one may well wonder, could make us want to have anything to do with a faculty of judgment that can only pass judgment on something if it acts *as if* it understood something which it does not? What makes us so susceptible to a faculty that acts *as if* it understood something it does not, is not only that we do this all the time in acting *as if* we understood a plethora of things which we do not (beginning with ourselves, and “man” in general), but that the very concept of understanding (and of “concept”) implies a notion of “finality” that is an essential part of the faculty of judgment (and reason) and therefore never final:

Now the concept of an Object, so far as it contains at the same time the ground of the actuality of this Object, is called its end, and the agreement of a thing with that constitution of things which is only possible according to ends, is called the finality of its form. Accordingly the principle for judgement, in respect of the form of the things of nature under empirical laws generally, is the finality of nature in its multiplicity. In other words, by this concept nature is represented *as if* an understanding contained the ground of the unity of the manifold of its empirical laws. (19–20, emphasis mine)

Contained within what seems to be a rather arid statement is in fact something revolutionary (Zammito refers to the “cognitive turn” that occurred in 1789 with Kant’s discovery of reflective judgments¹²), namely, the notion that we always assume a finality of nature in our objective understanding that is not real. This is not to say that the sun, trees, ground, ocean, etc. are not really there, but that we always naively assume that *our* determination of such things

¹² “Moreover as he wrote on it, he came to conceive a philosophical viewpoint for the third *Critique* which extended—and therefore modified—the cognitive theory of the First *Critique*: the theory of reflective judgment.” *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, 45.

constitutes *their* reality, which is surely not the case. (Our sun, as Heraclitus correctly noted, is “new every day.”) To use Kant’s terminology, all determinative judgments turn out to be reflective judgments if they contain, as most objective determinations do, a reference to something outside us.¹³ (This recalls Errol Harris’s argument that the “substance of Spinoza” (the influence of which upon Kant and the other Idealists discussed here is profound) is the result of a method which is both—or *neither*—inductive and deductive.¹⁴ It is for this reason that the *finality* of nature must always be viewed as merely contingent by the faculty of judgment insofar as such finality—the most objective of determinations—is denied by the very finality of its assertion:

This adaptation of nature to our cognitive faculties is presupposed a priori by judgement on behalf of its reflection upon it according to empirical laws. But understanding all the while recognizes it objectively as contingent, and it is merely judgement that attributes it to nature as transcendent finality, i.e. a finality in respect of the Subject’s faculty of cognition. For, were it not for this presupposition, we should have no order of nature in accordance with empirical laws, and, consequently, no guiding-thread for an experience that has to be brought to bear upon these in all their variety, or for an investigation of them. (23)

Such judgments of finality and objectivity where there is none are not to be deemed absurd at worst or irrelevant at best for, again, it is easy to turn this accusation against the accuser in pointing out that science itself does this all the time, the result of which is that science, not art or teleology, might be viewed as the greater—because less self-conscious—fiction. Or, as Kant points out, without the falsity of finality the truth of (empirical) objectivity would not even exist, leading to the necessary conclusion that the so-called absurdity of such assertions of finality, while true, is nonetheless truer than the objective determinations which they make possible! As Rodolphe Gasché, a literary theorist who, like Nancy, is more inclined to note the strangeness of Kant’s text than many of his philosophical counterparts, observes:

¹³ As Béatrice Longuenesse points out: “Thus, the peculiar feature of aesthetic and teleological judgments is not that they are reflective judgments (*for every judgment on empirical objects as such is reflective*.” *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, 164 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁴ *The Substance of Spinoza*, 7. This work also addresses Spinoza’s influence on German Idealism at great length. For other scholars who stress the importance of Spinoza upon Kant and the Idealists (not to mention the many references to Spinoza by the Idealists themselves—including Schelling’s famous declaration to Hegel that he had “become a Spinozist”), see *Spinoza and German Idealism*, eds Förster and Melamed.

Mere reflection would thus also seem to blur the traditional divide characteristic of philosophical thinking—the one between the empirical and the transcendental. Permeated by “mereness” ... mere reflection appears to perform a mode of thinking that gives more food for thought than any concept could hope to exhaust ... but if, finally the mereness proper to merely reflective judgment signifies this judgment’s unique philosophical nature, its peculiarity is owing not to a lack of rigor on Kant’s part but rather to the philosophical nature of the problem that it brings into view, and that refuses, as it were, the identity of the concept.¹⁵

The cause of reason’s imposition of such forms of finality as causality on a world which largely eschews them, is *pleasure*. Pleasure, according to the Kantian schema, belongs entirely to the middle faculty of judgment, as opposed to those of either understanding or reason, precisely because in those cases “understanding [and, we would add, reason] necessarily follows the bend of its own nature without ulterior aim,” whereas, in the exercise of the faculty of judgment, the discovery of meaning outside itself (again, as applying to a world where such meaning is inherently foreign) is so inherently pleasurable that one might even wonder if judgments are a function of pleasure rather than the converse. No matter, either way, Kant asserts, for:

To find out this order [the “order of nature”] is an undertaking on the part of our understanding, which pursues it with a regard to a necessary end of its own, that, namely, of introducing into nature unity of principle. This end must, then, be attributed to nature by judgment, since no law can here be prescribed to it by understanding. (27)

As Kant goes on to describe the feeling of pleasure which is necessarily coupled with the discovery of the principles of nature, one cannot help noticing how close his description of this “gay wisdom” is to Nietzsche’s and Aristotle’s description of the pleasure which accompanies the figurative processes of rhetoric and poetics (Aristotle’s “easy learning”¹⁶):

the discovery, on the other hand, that two or more empirical heterogeneous laws of nature are allied under one principle that embraces them both, *is the ground of a very appreciable pleasure*, often even of admiration, and such, too, as does not wear off even though we are already familiar with its object. It is true that we no longer notice any decided pleasure in the comprehensibility of

¹⁵ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics*, 41.

¹⁶ *Poetics*, 20.

nature, or in the unity of its divisions into genera and species, without which the empirical concepts, that afford us our knowledge of nature in its particular laws, would not be possible. Still, it is certain that the pleasure appeared in due course, and only by reason of the most ordinary experience being impossible without it, has it become gradually fused with simple cognition, and no longer arrests particular attention. (28–9, emphasis mine)

In short, “Something that makes us attentive in our estimate of nature to its finality for our understanding—and endeavours to bring, where possible, its heterogeneous laws under higher, though still always empirical, laws—is required, in order that, on meeting with success, *pleasure may be felt* in this their accord with our cognitive faculty, which accord is regarded by us as purely contingent” (28, emphasis mine). “Though still always empirical”, because judgment is a faculty that applies the subjective freedom of judgment to objects of nature, and “purely contingent” because such an extension of the pure categories of reason and understanding makes fools or liars of them both—although, we hasten to add, the category of judgment is only foolish or “contingent” relative to those, but completely valid in itself.

Unlike other sensations which are separate from but integrated into their perceptual realities, pleasure finds no expression in the perceptual reality which accompanies it: “That subjective side of a representation which is incapable of becoming an element of cognition is the pleasure or displeasure connected with it” (29). Similarly, Kant argues, the finality which is associated with the object of our cognitions has no part in such perceptual realities, but is rather a function of the “pleasure principle,” as it were: “Hence we only apply the term ‘final’ to the object on account of its representation being immediately coupled with the feeling of pleasure.” It is this pleasurable sense separate from its contentual, objective reality that leads Kant to formulate his extraordinary notion of “subjective,” “formal finality” (the “Third Moment” of the “Analytic of the Beautiful”) by which he means the pleasure associated, not with the object as such, but with its subject-imposed end. This being the case, Kant raises the question (which he never answers): “The only question is whether the representation of finality exists at all” (30). Finality, as we shall discuss further in the following chapter on Kant’s teleology, is always marked by its own lack of finality, and existence.

Aesthetic enjoyment has nothing to do with conceptual understanding except that, paradoxically, it is modeled on same (or vice versa), for the aesthetic intuition is coupled with a sense of form and finality “comparable to” the way the intuition is coupled with its concept in understanding:

For that apprehension of forms in the imagination can never take place without the reflective judgement, even when it has no intention of so doing, *comparing them* at least with its faculty of referring intuitions to concepts. If, now, *in this comparison*, imagination (as the faculty of intuitions a priori) is undesignedly brought into accord with understanding, (as the faculty of concepts,) by means of a given representation, and a feeling of pleasure is thereby aroused, then the object must be regarded as final for the reflective judgement. A judgement of this kind is an aesthetic judgement upon the finality of the Object, which does not depend upon any present concept of the object, and does not provide one. (30–1, emphasis mine)

Kant is modeling aesthetic “understanding” on an understanding which it is not, but to which it is only “comparable.” The implications of this, given the obvious relevance of this to any figurative theory of art or theory of art that emphasizes the importance of figuration, are enormous, including the question of how we are to understand this “understanding” which is not really understanding. How, in other words, do we understand comparison/analogy/figuration if one must utilize a “comparable” form of understanding which is not what figuration (e.g. metaphor) really is?

We will return to this question of figuration—of the role of metaphor in a metaphysics that can only be “understood” metaphorically—when Kant returns to the question of the supersensible at the end of this Introduction. For now it is important to follow the order of Kant’s presentation as he mentions, for the first time, the idea of beauty, which he defines as the intuition of formal finality, the idea of finality necessarily making something beautiful for everyone, and not just for me (this is described more fully in Kant’s “Second Moment” of the “Analytic of the Beautiful”):

When the form of an object ... without regard to any concept ... is estimated as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an Object ... for all in general who pass judgement ... the object is then called beautiful, and the faculty of judging by means of such a pleasure (and so also with universal validity) is called taste. (31)

Beauty, and the faculty of taste which is required for its apprehension, is here defined as the perception of finality which is modeled on a conceptual “finality” in being universal but which has no conceptual reality itself. Beauty is, in other words, a conceptless concept, *and precisely because this conceptless concept can only be contingent with respect to its “object” it is absolute with regard to this*

objective sense of finality: “As this accordance of the object with faculties of the Subject is contingent, it gives rise to a representation of a finality on the part of the object in respect of the cognitive faculties of the Subject.”

“Here, now, is a pleasure which no concepts could ever enable us to regard as necessarily connected with the representation of an object.” It is this strange coupling of contingency with absolute necessity—of conceptless concepts—that renders all aesthetic judgments *objectively* null and void the moment they are pronounced:

As with all empirical judgements, it is, consequently, unable to announce objective necessity or lay claim to a priori validity. But, the judgement of taste in fact only lays claim ... to be valid for every one, and, despite its inner contingency, this is always possible. (3–2)

Kant is referring here to the hermeneutic principle that a point of aesthetic interpretation is always paradoxical and, as such, never objectively true.¹⁷ This does not, however, make interpretations of art nonsensical, for it is this very lack of empirical, objective determinations that provides for their higher reflective value. The important ontological “as if” mentioned earlier is of critical importance here, for we make judgments about works of art *as if* they were objectively true, which, in a way, they are, because referring to a figurative, “formal” reality (finality) that is only capable of being determined by this “as if”—as if as if were real, as it were:

The only point that is strange or out of the way about it [aesthetic judgment], is that it is not an empirical concept, but a feeling of pleasure (and so not a concept at all), that is yet exacted from every one by the judgement of taste, just *as if* it were a predicate united to the cognition of the Object, and that is meant to be conjoined with its representation. (32, emphasis mine)

Judgments of taste are *a priori*, and so universal, as *possibilities*, but utterly lacking in determinable, objective reality as *actualities*: “This is why judgments of taste are subjected to a *Critique* in respect of their possibility. For their possibility presupposes an *a priori* principle, although that principle is neither a cognitive principle for understanding nor a practical principle for the will, and is thus in no way determinat *a priori*” (32–3). Thus, it is always only possible that Goethe’s *Faust* is a great work of art, although that possibility is actualized as a possibility by its seemingly canonical status. But the “fact” that *Faust* is a

¹⁷ See, for example, Cleanth Brooks’s “The Language of Paradox,” in *The Well-Wrought Urn*.

great work of art is only something that can be determined by the actualization of this possibility through the experience of it as a work of art, not by anything that can be objectively determined. (*Faust* is a particularly good example of this given its remarkably incoherent nature, which extends even to its lack of plot, motivation, and disjunctive character relations.¹⁸)

The final two sections (VIII/IX) of Kant's Introduction bring the intervening discussion of aesthetic "finality" back into its connection with the supersensible absolute. Such finality can be considered, Kant begins, either "purely subjectively" "as a finality of form," or "objectively" "as the harmony of the form of the object with the possibility of the *thing itself* according to an antecedent concept of it containing the ground of this form" (33, emphasis mine). When Kant adds that this relative distinction corresponds to one between "the pleasure immediately felt in mere reflection on the form of the object" and between "a definite cognition of the object under a given concept [which] has nothing to do with a feeling of pleasure" (33–4), we might think Kant is thinking of the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, correspondingly. But this is surely not the case, and not just because Kant never brings up the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in this discussion. For the sublime, as everyone who has written on the subject, including Kant, knows, is also about pleasure. Kant is referring here, instead, to the distinction between the two *Critiques* contained within the third *Critique*, namely, the *Critiques* of Aesthetic and Teleological Judgment respectively:

On these considerations is based the division of the *Critique* of Judgement into that of the *aesthetic* and the *teleological* judgement. By the first is meant the faculty of estimating formal finality (otherwise called subjective) by the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, by the second the faculty of estimating the real finality (objective) of nature by understanding and reason. (34, emphasis in the original)

In the case of aesthetic judgment the pleasurable sense of finality in nature is "a principle without which understanding could not feel itself at home in nature" (35). The difference between the aesthetic and the teleological is thus primarily that between an "object" without a concept (aesthetics) and a concept without

¹⁸ The incoherence of *Faust* is only partly due to the fact that Goethe pieced Part I together from various "fragments," and that *Faust* II was written many years after *Faust* I. For example, the "bet," which may actually be a "pact," concerning Faust's soul is decidedly ambiguous and, of course, never resolved in *Faust* I. The relationship between Faust and Margareta is unrequited in the end (which is why Margareta doesn't leave the dungeon with Faust when she has the chance), and, finally, it is clear from the outset that Mephistopheles cannot provide Faust with any of the answers he is looking for.

an object (teleology), both of which converge upon the notion of a supersensible that is common to both:

Understanding prescribes laws a priori for nature as an Object of sense so that we may have a theoretical knowledge of it in a possible experience. Reason prescribes laws a priori for freedom and its peculiar causality as the supersensible in the Subject, so that we may have a purely practical knowledge. The realm of the concept of nature under the one legislation, and that of the concept of freedom under the other, are completely cut off from all reciprocal influence that they might severally (each according to its own principles) exert upon the other, by the broad gulf that divides the supersensible from phenomena. The concept of freedom determines nothing in respect of the theoretical cognition of nature; and the concept of nature likewise nothing in respect of the practical laws of freedom. *To that extent, then, it is not possible to throw a bridge from the one realm to other.* (36–7, emphasis mine)

“To that extent.” That is, this ‘bridge to nowhere’ between the phenomenal world and the supersensible is precisely its extension beyond this “extent” provided by the faculty of judgment:

Yet although the determining grounds of causality according to the concept of freedom (and the practical rule that this contains) have no place in nature, and the sensible cannot determine the supersensible in the Subject; still the converse is possible (not, it is true, in respect of the knowledge of nature, but of the consequences arising from the supersensible and bearing on the sensible). (37)

“Still, the converse is possible”: namely, one cannot go from the sensible (e.g. the rose) to the supersensible (i.e. its underlying, first principle, its “why”), but it is possible to go from the supersensible to the sensible, that is, it is possible to project into the world an underlying, supersensible “cause of causes” which is—indeed, must be—lacking in the world itself: “So much indeed is implied in the concept of a causality by freedom, the *operation* of which, in conformity with the formal laws of freedom, is to take effect in the world” (37, emphasis in the original). The beauty of the rose can be seen as absolute, not despite the fact that it is “*ohne wahrum*,” but *because* of the fact that it is “without why.”¹⁹ Consideration of this supersensible “cause of causes” is not, Kant insists, to be rejected “on the charge of contradiction that it is alleged to involve” because, “while its possibility is impenetrable,” it is not an actual cause but the subjective

¹⁹ Angelus Silesius’s now famous line, “Die rose ist ohne wahrum,” is discussed by Heidegger in Lectures Six and Seven of *Der Satz vom Grund* (*The Principle of Reason*).

freedom from mere objective causality that corresponds to the logical reality of subjective freedom as it exists in its very “impenetrability.” Moreover, this impenetrability of the freedom of the subject does not necessarily stop with the subject, for it is freed even from that: “The effect in accordance with the concept of freedom is the final end which (or the manifestation of which in the sensible world) is to exist, and this presupposes the condition of the possibility of that end in nature (i.e. in the nature of the Subject as a being of the sensible world, namely, as man)” (38).

The “name of the rose,” it seems, is man. In other words, “finality in nature” is the necessary extension of the supersensible freedom of man, whose own “impenetrable cause” extends to the possible determination of that cause in nature itself. As Kant concludes:

Understanding, by the possibility of its supplying a priori laws for nature, furnishes a proof of the fact that nature is cognized by us only as phenomenon, and in so doing points to its having a supersensible substrate; but this substrate it leaves quite undetermined. Judgement by the a priori principle of its estimation of nature according to its possible particular laws provides this supersensible substrate (within as well as without us) with *determinability through the intellectual faculty*. But reason gives determination to the same a priori by its practical law. Thus judgement makes possible the transition from the realm of the concept of nature to that of the concept of freedom. (38, emphasis in the original)

The mere fact that we can understand nature through our subjective laws of understanding (e.g. causality, space, etc.) is proof, for Kant, of the necessary possibility of the supersensible, for the mere existence of phenomena as objects determined by our subjective laws of understanding means that there must also be a supersensible substrate for those same phenomena which is, then, nothing more than the subjective basis of those objective determinations. The supersensible absolute, in other words, is the aesthetic basis of all objective reality, however much it may seem, on the basis of objective reality, to be absurd at best, or non-existent at worst. The “existence” of beauty, sublimity and fine art, while virtually non-existent from any purely objective point of view, proves otherwise. Or, as Kant puts it: “Judgment by the a priori principle of its estimation of nature according to its possible particular laws provides this supersensible substrate.” To fail to understand “art and the absolute” is thus to fail to understand art, although, as Kant clearly demonstrated, this lack of understanding is itself all too understandable.

Kant II: *The Critique of Teleological Judgment*

*In point of fact, what happens in aesthetic reflective judgment is not essentially different from what seems to take place in teleological judgment.*¹

All writers on the history of German Idealism acknowledge that it was left to Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel and other lesser known figures (Reinhold, Schulze, Beck et al.²) to work through the problems and issues raised by Kant's writings and lectures, and especially the problems and issues raised by the last, third *Critique*.³ This is particularly the case with regard to the problems raised by the "cognitive turn" which led to Kant's groundbreaking notions of reflective judgment and its relation to the free, "indeterminative and indeterminate concept" ("ein Begriff an sich unbestimmt und zugleich unbestimmbar"⁴) of the supersensible (*Übersinnliches*). Because the three major divisions of Kant's third *Critique* (the "Analytic of the Beautiful," the "Analytic of the Sublime," and the "Critique of Teleological Judgment") are all ultimately united by this concept of the absolute ("The unity of the supersensibles in fact points to the possibility of the unity of the *Critique of Aesthetic judgment* with the *Critique of Teleological Judgment* in one work"⁵), I will focus here on a particular section of the last, and far less frequently discussed, of these three divisions of the final *Critique*, Section #77 of the "Critique of Teleological Judgment," in order to continue this exploration of the supersensible substrate of fine art (which includes, for Kant,

¹ Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics*, 32.

² *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, eds George di Giovanni, H. S. Harris, and Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*.

³ As Tom Rockmore stated: "Kant's normative view of knowledge as system raised a number of problems. It was clear to all those who were not opposed to the Critical philosophy that the system on which he insisted was nowhere present in his thought." "Antifoundationalism, Circularity and the Spirit of Fichte," in *Fichte*, eds Breazeale and Rockmore, 103.

⁴ KU, 280.

⁵ Gary Banham, *Kant and the Ends of Aesthetics*, 94. This "unity" is not, as I hope to demonstrate here, merely a "possibility." In this chapter, I attempt to show how the teleological import of art (its link to the supersensible discussed in the previous chapter) is more important than even Banham and Gasché acknowledge—although those writers are among the few to discuss the "CTJ" at all.

our experience of beauty and the sublime⁶). However, before reaching that particular section of the Teleology it will be necessary to prepare the ground by clarifying some of the terms and ideas which are essential to its understanding. And then, after our discussion of #77, it will be necessary to indicate some of the implications of Kant's teleology to other important issues involved in the relation of aesthetics to metaphysics.

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The link between the earlier two thirds of the *Critique of Judgment* ("The Analytic of the Beautiful" and "The Analytic of the Sublime") with the final "Critique of Teleological Judgment" is made explicit by Kant in the transitional "Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment" which comes at the end of the former two parts of Kant's treatise. In discussing the necessary "antinomy of taste" which requires that all aesthetic judgments be simultaneously subjective and objective—both my personal, sensible feeling and my knowledge that this feeling has universal validity—Kant makes clear the connection between this aesthetic antinomy and its relation to the "teleological," supersensible absolute:

the judgement of taste contains beyond doubt an enlarged reference on the part of the representation of the object (and on the part of the subject) which lays the foundation of an extension of judgements of this kind to necessity for everyone ... But the mere pure rational concept of the supersensible lying at the basis of the object (and of the judging subject for that matter) as object of sense, and thus as phenomenon, is just such a concept. (207)

Like the judgment of taste, which is based on a private sensation but extends that feeling into a judgment with regard to the universal validity of what is beautiful or sublime, the "indeterminative idea of the supersensible" ("die unbestimmte Idee des Übersinnlichen") likewise overreaches knowledge (*Verstand*) by extending it to the notion of an absolute origin or ground that cannot be known as such. Thus, an assertion of God as the ultimate creator is like my judgment of the sublimity of the ocean or the beauty of the rose insofar as I extend my perception of something that is merely sensible into a judgment

⁶ I disagree, then, with Paul Guyer's view that "it would be a mistake to think that such judgments [the four "Moments" of the "Analytic of the Beautiful"] should be the norm for all aesthetic judgments ... Kant does not reduce all aesthetic experience to a single model." *Kant*, 312. Moreover, although he discusses these aesthetic matters at length in this work, there is no mention whatsoever of the essential relation of the aesthetic to the absolute that is the subject here.

of something true that has universal validity for everyone: the ocean becomes a symbol of something that it is not, namely, the infinite, and the rose becomes the image of an immortal—as well as, for Yeats, “immoral”—beauty⁷ that extends far beyond, and so has nothing to do with, the sensible appearance of the thing that I am looking at. Likewise, the idea of God as creator posits the notion of a knowable substratum to the knowable sensible that is ultimately unknowable as such. It is for this reason that, at the end of the paragraph just cited, Kant insists that, like so-called “proofs” of the existence of God, judgments of taste (sc. beauty and sublimity) also cannot be proven.

Beauty and sublimity are thus aesthetic ways in which humanity realizes its own “supersensible substrate” (*das übersinnliche Substrat der Menschheit*, 281). In the first (of two) “remarks” which Kant adds to this section of the “Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment” Kant returns to this idea via the critical notions of “aesthetic ideas” and “genius” that he had developed earlier in the “Analytic of the Sublime.” An “aesthetic idea” is the figurative expression of something for which there is no literal understanding; Kant’s examples of such “ideas” are (among others) the way Jupiter’s eagle and the veil of Isis proffer “intuitions” (*Anschauungen*) “for which an adequate concept can never be found” (284/210), because, although the eagle is not really Jupiter, nor is there a literal veil covering “All that ever is, was, and will be,” the ideas of such are rendered, as they must be, through such necessarily veiled images. (It is for this reason that Kant’s excitement is palpable as he singles out the veiled Isis as the most sublime—i.e. the most adequate—expression of the necessary veiling of all figuration, of all fine art, and all representations of the absolute.⁸) Such aesthetic ideas—by which Kant means “metaphors” in the broadest sense of the term⁹—are not seen by Kant, as they often are by others,¹⁰ as inadequate representations of something that could be rendered more successfully. For the supersensible can only be represented by an aesthetic idea which, like Jupiter’s eagle, adequately conveys the truth of something that cannot be rendered otherwise. It is thus that Kant refers to the capacity for forming such

⁷ As in *The Rose*, an early collection of Yeats’ poetry.

⁸ I discuss “the veil of Isis” in the Preface, and elsewhere in this work.

⁹ This identification of Kant’s “aesthetic ideas” with metaphoric, symbolic language is obvious from all the examples of “aesthetic ideas” Kant gives in section #49, but is also referred to by Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*:

This is clearly shown in Kant’s paradigms ... our ‘absolute metaphor’ appears here as “the transportation of the reflection on one object of intuition to another, quite different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond.” (4).

¹⁰ See Paul de Man, *The Epistemology of Metaphor*.

images as “humanity’s own supersensible substratum,” for humanity ultimately “knows itself” not as the object of some limited cognition but rather through such figures of an absolute that exists within us. The “genius,” as the creator of such aesthetic ideas, is nothing more nor less than a person who reflects humanity’s supersensible substrate: “The subjective principle—that is to say, the indeterminative idea of the supersensible within us—can only be indicated as the unique key to the riddle of this faculty [of Judgment], itself concealed from us in its sources; and there is no means of making it any more intelligible” (208).

For Kant, the attribution of a teleological end to the understandable objects of nature (organic or otherwise) is as inapplicable there as it is applicable to beauty, sublimity, and works of fine art (through judgment) and God (through reason): “Intrinsic natural perfection, as possessed by things that are only possible as physical ends, and that are therefore called organisms, is unthinkable and inexplicable on any analogy to any known physical, or natural agency” (24). Because genuine teleological thinking is strictly a matter of what Kant calls “reflective” (*reflektierend*) as opposed to “determinative” (*bestimmend*) judgment, such products of the natural world can never be relevant to the thinking of finality which is inherent to teleology, theology, and art:

... the extrinsic finality of natural things affords no adequate justification for taking them as ends of nature to explain the reason of their existence, or for treating their contingently final effects as ideally the grounds of their existence on the principle of final causes. (26)

That Supreme Intelligence as cause of the natural world is not a ground for the determinant judgment, but only for the reflective judgment, and is absolutely incapable of authorizing us to make any objective assertion. (47)

We do not know the end (or for that matter the cause) of the natural world: “This involves our referring nature to something supersensible, a reference that far transcends any teleological knowledge we have of nature” (27). While we can know many things about the mechanical laws of nature, we cannot know why such things are, rather than being nothing at all. As we shall see, this is precisely the space that teleo-theology occupies, a space which Kant first opened for art and aesthetics in general (art and the absolute) but which was left for later thinkers, preeminently Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer and Hegel, to occupy (sc. art as the absolute).

Section #77: “The peculiarity of human understanding that makes the conception of a physical end possible for us.”

As numerous philosophers have written on the subject of the absolute, and as Kant would certainly agree:

we are forced to assume a thing-in-itself. This is a notion which is self-contradictory if consciousness were to be essentially a relating activity. *There is therefore something which must be thought and yet cannot be thought.*¹¹ (emphasis mine)

While it is clearly not possible to make a literal, determinative judgment regarding the underlying, supersensible “cause of causes,” it is not only possible but even desirable that we pursue our thinking about such matters through the use of reflective judgment in general and analogy (*Analogie*) in particular:

By the peculiar (*eigentümlichen*) constitution of my cognitive faculties the only way I can judge of the possibility of those things and of their production is by conceiving for that purpose a cause working analogous to the causality of an understanding. In the former [sc. determinative, literal] case I desire to ascertain something about the Object, and I am required to prove the objective reality of a conception I have assumed. In the latter case it is only the employment of my cognitive faculties that is determined by reason (*Vernunft*) in accordance with their peculiar character ... (51)

We have already referred to the important connection Kant has drawn here between *metaphysical* thinking of the supersensible and the *metaphorical*—sc. analogical—language that is “peculiarly” necessary to its proper understanding.¹² But, for now, we will keep our attention on the larger question of the necessary relationship between metaphysical and aesthetic judgments in general, judgments which, in the modern era of literary theory (beginning with the New Critics), are viewed as inextricably linked to such questions of figuration.¹³

¹¹ Harald Høffding, *A History of Modern Philosophy*.

¹² “Metaphor is clearly characterized as a model invested with a pragmatic function, from which a ‘rule of the reflection’ can be gleaned that may then ‘be applied’ in the use of the idea of reason ... In this sense, ‘all our cognition of God is merely symbolic’ (in the Kantian terminology).” Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 4.

¹³ See Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, Sechste Stunde, and Stellardi, *Heidegger and Derrida on Philosophy and Metaphor*. However, it should also be noted that Kant’s notion of “aesthetic ideas” (i.e. metaphors) finds its way into English romanticism via Coleridge’s famous notion of symbolism, which he “appropriated” more directly from Schelling. For more on this important connection between English romanticism and German Idealism, see Mark Kipperman, *Beyond Enchantment*, 109 *et passim*.

Pondering the ultimate cause of nature (*Naturzweck*) can only be a reflective (vs. determinative) possibility (*Möglichkeit*), but the question remains: what makes this possibility possible? Or, put differently: what is the “peculiar” status of this possibility—is it to recall Aristotle’s distinction from his *Poetics*, the sort of “possible impossibility” found in Homer, or is it the inferior “impossible possibility” found in lesser writers that Aristotle rejects in favor of the former?¹⁴ The question is an important one because we have to do here not just with abstract thinking about the ultimate meaning of things that could easily be consigned to the stratosphere of fantasy (the sort of *Schwärmerei* that Kant in particular but also his Idealist followers feared), but with the application of such abstract thinking to the reality of all objects of experience and, one might add, to the reality of our own thinking. As I hope to demonstrate, it is precisely beauty, sublimity, and fine art that proffers such a “possibly impossible” “object that is no object”—for which Kant also coins the oxymoronic term “intellectual intuition”¹⁵—that is necessarily linked to the supersensible absolute.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the “peculiarity” (*Eigentümlichkeit*) of such aesthetic, metaphysical thinking is due to the peculiarity of the faculty of Judgment (*Urteilkraft*) in its attempt to occupy a middle ground between Understanding (*Verstand*) in its relation to objects and Reason (*Vernunft*) in its relation to our own subjective thought: “The difference turns, therefore, on a peculiarity of our (human) understanding relative to our power of judgment in reflecting on things in nature” (“Es betrifft also eine Eigentümlichkeit unseres (menschlichen) Verstandes in Ansehung der Urteilkraft, in der Reflexion derselben über Dinge der Natur” [359/61]). And yet, Kant quickly adds, this distinctly human thinking regarding things in their relation to the supersensible absolute is not really human insofar as it has to do with the ultimate “objects” of nature/experience and a supersensible that has been made sensible: “We must

¹⁴ *Poetics*, 32.

¹⁵ “Intellectual intuition” is discussed throughout this text as the particular—or “peculiar”—mode of apprehending the absolute in works of art. David Krell, in *The Tragic Absolute*, refers to a “useful summary statement concerning ‘intellectual intuition’ by the editors of the Hanser edition of Hölderlin’s collected works:

Intellektuale Anschauung: a spiritual-intellectual envisaging, the supreme form of knowing in the Neoplatonic doctrine of spirit ... For Hölderlin it is an intuition—the intuition that ‘all is one.’ (300)

For Krell “the proper bearer ... of intellectual intuition [in Hölderlin] is the tragic poem (53), but, as Hölderlin himself and the other Idealists maintain, such intuition is found in all works of art. For a broader, and lengthier discussion of this important topic see Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, although it is surprising that, elsewhere, Nassar states that Kant rejects intellectual intuition, which is true of Hegel, not of Kant (see her essay in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, 200).

have here an underlying idea of a possible understanding different from the human" ("so muss hier die Idee von einem andern möglichen Verstande, als dem menschlichen"). In other words, by positing the reality of an absolute that is by definition different from the ordinary objects of experience (and from the subject—man—of those ordinary objects of experience) the human is forced to consider the possibility of a thinking that goes beyond itself, and—moreover—beyond any mundane notion of what such a "beyond" must be: "And there was a similar implication in *The Critique of Reason*. We were bound to have present to our minds the thought of another possible form of intuition, if ours was to be deemed one of a special kind, one, namely, for which objects were only to rank as phenomena)" (61/359; the original statement is in parentheses). Absolute thinking, as it were, is thus defined here by Kant as a thinking beside itself in which the human becomes its own metonymy—i.e. as a "superhuman" (*ein anderer (höherer) Verstand, als der menschliche*) posited metaphorically by the human as outside itself, separated from itself by an inherent gap (or caesura) that provides, paradoxically, its true meaning. (Cf. Fichte's reference to the *hiatus irrationalis* of thought's relation to itself, and to the absolute, in the later, 1804, version of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.¹⁶) As we shall argue, and as Derrida and other "post-structural" thinkers have repeatedly maintained, this "contingent" (*zufällig*) metonymical gap is not at all absent from our thinking and, moreover, fully present in the realm of the aesthetic and in the larger faculty of judgment.

"This contingency turns up quite naturally in the particular which judgment has to bring under the universal supplied by the conceptions of understanding" (61). That is, every particular (*besondere*) referential object of understanding, insofar as it is judged to be something other than just an object of our understanding, is accompanied by a contingent gap which separates it from itself as itself: "For the particular is not determined by the universal of our understanding" (62). Here Kant pauses to consider the possibility of a cognitive understanding that would be freed from such contingency:

But now intuition is also a factor in knowledge, and a faculty of complete spontaneity of intuition would be a cognitive faculty distinct from sensibility and wholly independent of it (*ein Vermögen einer völligen Spontaneität der Anschauung ein von der Sinnlichkeit unterschiedenes und davon ganz unabhängiges Erkenntnisvermögen, mithin Verstand in der allgemeinsten Bedeutung sein*

¹⁶ *The Science of Knowing*, 120, 124, 158; e.g. "The principle for the irrational gap as such, i.e. for the absolute absence of principle, as such, should be demonstrated."

würde) ... Thus we are able to imagine an intuitive understanding—negatively, or simply as not discursive—which does not move, as ours does with its conceptions (*Begriffe*), from the universal to the particular and so to the individual. Such an understanding *would not* experience the above contingency in the way nature and understanding accord in natural products subject to particular laws. But it is just this contingency that makes it so difficult for our understanding to reduce the multiplicity of nature to the unity of knowledge. (62)

Kant cannot resist considering the possibility of freeing one's thinking from the inherent contingency (*Zufälligkeit*) of thinking, for (as argued in the preceding chapter) understanding is necessarily governed by the faculty of judgment and thereby made aware that the purity of its intuitions is contaminated by the knowledge that makes all such intuitions (beginning with space and time, according to the first *Critique*) possible: "It is just this contingency that makes it so difficult for our understanding to reduce the multiplicity of nature to the unity of knowledge."

And yet a retreat into a kind of positivism in which the particular is not determined by the universal, as in judgment, but *is* the universal is no longer an option, for the "possibility" (*Möglichkeit*) of such an agreement between thinking and the world outside us is the very real "possible impossibility" that determines our own indeterminative being as humans. Such a determination of a reality that can only be contingent is impossible outside of teleology, for it is the latter that considers the possibility of an end that is always precluded by its beginning—that is, by its inchoate contingency or, more positively, by its freedom. Most importantly, and in contradistinction with those who sometimes read Kant less generously,¹⁷ Kant does not fail to privilege this realm of possibility (i.e. judgment), nor does he fail to give such teleological judgments their full weight of strangeness and paradoxicality¹⁸:

But, to do so [sc. "to conceive the possibility of such an accord of the things in nature with the power of judgment"], we must at the same time imagine an understanding different from our own relative to which—and, what is more, without starting to attribute an end to it—we may represent the above accord of natural laws with our power of judgment, which for our understanding is only thinkable when ends are introduced as a middle term effecting the connexion, as necessary. (underlining mine, italics in the original)

¹⁷ Derrida, "The Parergon," *The Truth in Painting*, 37–82.

¹⁸ An excellent reading of this aspect of Kant's third *Critique* is to be found in Samuel Weber's "The Foundering of Aesthetics."

Judgment thus requires a thinking “different from our own understanding” because we are thinking about something that we cannot think about, understanding something that we cannot understand, e.g. our own ends as human beings. Moreover, in this aesthetic/teleological understanding we posit an end (*Zweck*) which is no end, that is, a meaning that is no meaning: “without starting to attribute an end ... the above accord of (of things with thought) ... is only thinkable when ends are introduced as a middle term effecting the connexion, as *necessary*” (emphasis mine). The *end*, it seems, is a *middle* that is, as teleology, the very end of the matter—it being crucial to understand this understanding of the end/middle as an understanding “different from our own.”

In contradistinction to our determinative understanding, which applies logical concepts to particulars and thus can make no claim to knowledge of the whole or of the “multiplicity of the particular,” our reflective, intuitive or archetypal (*intuitive, urbildlichen/archetypus*) understanding “represents (*vorstellt*) the parts as both in their form and synthesis dependent upon the whole” (64/361). It would be self-contradictory for knowledge *in strictu sensu* to make any such claim because it refers only to the particular part of experience that can be understood from the strict application of a general principle, such as that of causality, rather than to our understanding of the causality of causality, i.e. to the underlying cause, “the possibility of the parts as both in their form and synthesis dependent upon the whole” (64). Knowledge cannot know the latter as a fact of experience, but it can “represent” its “possibility”:

But the representation of a whole may contain the source of the possibility of the form of that whole and of the nexus of the parts which that form involves. (64)
(*sondern nur, dass die Vorstellung eines Ganzen den Grund der Möglichkeit der Form desselben und der dazu gehörigen Verknüpfung der Teile enthalte*, 361)

The curious, metaleptic nature of human understanding thus ponders the original cause or causes of things when such understanding is, after all, a product of the very cause it would seek to understand: “But, now, the whole would in that case be an effect or product the *representation* of which is looked on as the *cause* of its possibility” (64, emphasis in the original). Theo-teleologically one reverses the usual order of things in following “a different type of causality from that of the physical laws of matter” by foregoing the actual for the “possible” in contemplating ends and final causes of things which ends are, from the viewpoint of normal causality, illogical insofar as they posit ends (and origins) of things that are merely effects of a hidden, underlying cause rather

than the underlying cause of such effects as its own positings of an underlying cause. One cannot, then, ever really know the supersensible origin or end of anything ("this principle does not touch the question of how such things themselves, even considered as phenomena, are possible," 64), but one can know that one *can* know—i.e. one can (and, indeed, one should and must, philosophically speaking) contemplate the *possibility* of such an origin or end. And as Kant demonstrates repeatedly throughout this work, such "theo-teleo-logical" thinking is no mere idle curiosity but rather the very essence of the human in its inherently metaphysical reality. (Despite his supposed rejection of Kant, I will argue in the Appendix of this work that Nietzsche's own metaphysical notion of an "aesthetic justification of life" is synonymous with Kant's position here.) Teleology (and all that goes along with it) may be illogical relative to understanding and "natural science," but it is not "self-contradictory," for the *intellectus archetypus* (vs. the *intellectus ectypus*) is founded on this same metaleptical lack of natural causality. It is interesting that, in the closing line of this particular paragraph, Kant refers to the inherent need in natural science/understanding for images (*Bildern*) which introduce an element of "contingency" whereas, aesthetically as well as teleologically, such images (Kant's "aesthetic ideas") are inherently freed from such contingency.

Kant contrasts the "mechanistic" explanation of the whole in relation to its parts with a teleological explanation insofar as the latter "presupposes the idea of a whole as that upon which the very nature and action of the parts depend" (65). If one were to apply the latter teleological explanation to the natural world, its underlying cause—i.e. one that would explain its ultimate "from which"—would be space, and that is no such explanation because "space is not a real ground of the generation of things" (65; Kant does add that, although only a "formal condition," space has some resemblance to the real ground (*Realgrund*) of which we are in search.) Nonetheless, "it is at least possible to consider the material world as a mere phenomenon (*Erscheinung*) and to think something which is not a phenomenon, namely a thing-in-itself, as its substrate" (65–6). Such thinking requires an "intellectual intuition" (*intellektuelle Anschauung*) that "is not the intuition we possess" but which, as numerous commentators on this strange notion have noted, is identified with the viewpoint of God *and art* insofar as it sees what is absolute as opposed to merely phenomenal or contingent.¹⁹ That is to say, we find ourselves thinking about something that we

¹⁹ See "intellectual intuition" in the Index to this work.

cannot think about, and therefore thinking with a thinking that is and is not our thinking: “In this way a supersensible real ground (*übersinnlicher Realgrund*) would be procured for nature, and for the nature of which we are ourselves a part” (66). Although it is only the abovementioned mechanistic explanation of the “objects of the senses” that is “necessary,” we “should” also consider (*betrachten*) their supersensible “harmony” (*Zusammeneinstimmung*) and “unity” (*Einheit*) as objects of reason (*Vernunft*). These two ways of explaining things are not, Kant insists, mutually exclusive, and although there is a certain self-affirming validity to the former mechanistic (i.e. scientific) explanation, “we can never get rid of the appeal to a completely different source of generation for the possibility of a product of this kind, namely, that of a causality by ends”:

It is utterly impossible for human reason, or for any finite reason qualitatively resembling ours, however much it may surpass it to some degree, to hope to understand the generation of a blade of grass from mere mechanical causes ... it is absolutely impossible for us to obtain any explanation at the hand of nature itself to account for any synthesis displaying finality (*Zweckverbindungen*). So by the constitution of our human faculty of knowledge it becomes *necessary* to look for the supreme source (*obersten Grund*) of this finality in an original understanding as the cause of the world (*ursprünglichen Verstande als Weltursache zu suchen*). (67/364)

I have emphasized the word “necessity” because, while the entire argument rests on the modal difference between “necessity” and “possibility,” here the terms “flip” insofar as the *possibility* of explaining the supreme, underlying cause of the world is itself deemed *necessary*. If such a possibility is chiasmatically necessary, it is no longer merely possible. Moreover, this chiasmus does not lead Kant to add that the necessity of explaining things mechanistically is also a “possible necessity” just as teleology is a “necessary possibility.” Thus, what Heidegger sees as our modern valorization of the grounded-ness of rational thinking²⁰ and the self-fulfilling belief that what is literal is true because it is the only truth that can be defined as such (i.e. literally) is not shared by Kant, at least not here. Although he does not emphasize this point as strongly as do certain of his successors (see the subsequent chapters on Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer), Kant does not privilege the literal mode of truth (*Verstand*) over reason (*Vernunft*) or judgment (*Urteilkraft*), modes in which, as in the case of teleological reasoning just discussed, “another kind of thinking” than that of the

²⁰ *Der Satz vom Grund*—which contains Heidegger’s main text on metaphor.

literal paradoxically defines the human through its *freedom*—understood (as we shall now see) *not* as any definition of freedom but rather as the *free* play of the imagination that Kant ascribes specifically to the aesthetic. It is for this reason that aesthetics and metaphysics merge as the “higher kind of truth” in which “it becomes necessary to look for the supreme source (*obersten Grund*) of this finality in an original understanding as the cause of the world (*ursprünglichen Verstande als Weltursache zu suchen*).”

It is plausible (if arrogant) to consider man—humanity—as the end of nature, but what, asks Kant, is the end of man? Kant quickly dismisses any physical/natural explanation of our “ultimate end” by noting that physical happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) is overruled by the *idea* of happiness, which is anything but physical:

The conception of happiness is not one which man abstracts more or less from his instincts and so derives from his animal nature. It is, on the contrary, a mere *idea* of a state, and one to which he seeks to make his actual state of being adequate under purely empirical conditions—an impossible task. (92, emphasis in the original)

Mankind posits a state of physical happiness as his/her ultimate goal, but fails to realize the obvious contradiction of this: that, having entered the teleological realm of “final ends” the physical, mechanistic world of nature has been effectively precluded from the very state of happiness which it aspires to fulfill. One cannot help but think again of Faust, who cleverly used this realization to avoid—until the controversial end of *Faust* Part II—losing his wager with that defender of humanity’s basest instincts (“If ever to the moment I shall say/ Beautiful moment, do not pass away!”²¹), when Kant writes: “For human nature is not so constituted as to rest or be satisfied in any possession or enjoyment whatever” (93). If the final end of man, and of nature insofar as the end of nature is man, is “not to be sought in nature,” then, “Where in man, at any rate, are we to place this ultimate end of nature?” (94). Since the *idea* of happiness is an *ideal* which is incapable of being fulfilled in nature, Kant posits the end of man—his/her teleology—as the very positing of such ends; in other words, the end of man is the uniquely human tendency to pose such questions, and to ponder such possibilities as “the end of man”:

Therefore, of all his ends in nature, we are left only with a formal, subjective condition, that, namely, of the aptitude for setting ends before himself at all,

²¹ *Faust* I, trans. Luke.

and, independent of nature in his power of determining ends, of employing nature as a means in accordance with the maxims of his free ends generally. This alone remains as what nature can effect relative to the final end that lies outside it, and as what may therefore be regarded as its ultimate end. The production in a rational being of an aptitude for any ends whatever of his own choosing, consequently of the aptitude of a being in his freedom, is culture. *Hence it is only culture that can be the ultimate end which we have cause to attribute to nature in respect of the human race.* (94, emphasis mine)

The end (or final goal) of man is thus the capacity for positing such a final end or goal, and this unique capacity, which is “purely formal and subjective” and therefore not physical or contentual, is to be found not in nature but in “freedom” and in “culture”. Nature is thus a means, and not an end, to that end which must exist outside of nature as the supersensible goal and origin of nature which it is the destiny of humanity to acknowledge as its very essence. Freedom is invoked numerous times in these sections as synonymous with the noumenal supersensible (“freedom is the one and only conception of the supersensible ...” 149) because the supersensible, final goal of our “pursuit of happiness”—the happiness of happiness, as it were—must be freed from any and all objective determination. But *culture* is also invoked in order to free this concept of freedom from a certain vacuousness in being freed from every conceptual determination, including itself. How, then, does culture, to which we might add “fine art,” fulfill our human, teleological essence?

The production in a rational being of an aptitude for any ends whatever of his own choosing, consequently of the aptitude of a being in his freedom, is culture. *Hence it is only culture that can be the ultimate end* which we have cause to attribute to nature in respect of the human race. (94–5; italics Kant’s, underlining mine)

It is in free works of cultural production, such as works of fine art (which is defined by Kant and others as free, unlike other forms of art), that humanity establishes its link with the supersensible absolute in creating works that have no natural or practical application, but whose inherent “disinterestedness” is only construed negatively if it is not understood as the very “essence of human freedom” (Schelling). Teleology is not, then, an empty category because it is essentially free and thus void of any content. Rather, it is replete with all the great works of culture and fine art which attest to the destiny of mankind in asserting its freedom from any objective determination and, more positively, its

own “supersensible absolute.” Although, at the end of the paragraph just cited, Kant rejects the notion of individual happiness in this process, this does not include the “universal” “disinterested pleasure” which, as the first two sections of the *Critique* amply demonstrate, is inherent both to the production as well as to the reception of all works of art, be they beautiful or sublime.

Kant is of course aware of the conflict between this definition of culture and the more realistic definitions that had come to dominate the understanding of culture within the culture of the eighteenth century (and after). Just as the more mechanical modes of cultural production, such as talent, aptitude, etc., have come to be identified with the essence of culture precisely because they are more objective and not at all supersensible, the majority of mankind (*die größte Zahl*) fails to understand the very culture of which they are a part. Moreover, the very separation of culture from anything objective risks valorizing the “impractical” as a way of avoiding this danger but, in the process, positing its own form of practicality “where devotion to what is superfluous becomes prejudicial to what is indispensable.” All such conflicts *within* culture, including conflicts *between* cultures such as war, are the necessary result of failing to achieve the true goal of culture, which is the teleological one of realizing the absolute—“necessary” because such conflicts are seen by Kant as necessary steps in the direction of an absolute freedom that would be freed from such conflicts. (In political terms, Kant relates this to a sense of “civil community” as well as to the ultimate goal of realizing the absolute through “cosmopolitanism.”) The key for Kant to overcoming such conflicts within culture is culture, and the key to culture is replacing individual happiness with communal pleasures such as art which are teleological representations of who we are as opposed to who we merely think we are:

Fine art and the sciences, if they do not make man morally better, yet, by conveying a pleasure that admits of universal communication and by introducing polish and refinement into society, make him civilized. Thus they do much to overcome the tyrannical propensities of sense, and so prepare man for a sovereignty in which reason alone shall have sway. Meanwhile all the evils visited upon us, now by nature, now by the truculent egoism of man, evoke the energies of the soul, and give it strength and courage to submit to no such force, and at the same time quicken in us a sense that in the depths of our nature there is an aptitude for higher ends. (97)

The “truculent egoism of man” is also that which “gives it strength to submit to no such force”; in other words, striving for *an* absolute is that which gives us

strength to strive for *the* absolute. Teleological questions of *the* absolute, ultimate truth are questions that cannot be answered through any natural understanding because they depend on the freedom to pose such questions independent of any objective determination:

What is the end for which things in the world, namely organized beings, possess this or that form, or are placed by nature in this or that relation to other things? On the contrary, once we have conceived an understanding that must be regarded as the cause of the possibility of such forms as they are actually found in things, we must go on and seek in this understanding for an objective ground capable of determining such productive understanding to the production of an effect of this kind. That ground is then the final end for which such things exist. (98)

Although Kant is more interested, in the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” in the religious and philosophical answers to the ultimate metaphysical question of ‘why there are things rather than nothing at all,’ our interest is in the aesthetic answer to this question which forms a bridge to the First Part, the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment.” Such a “bridge” is referenced in the passage just quoted, where Kant describes the metaphysical question as “an understanding that must be regarded as the cause of the possibility of such forms *as they are actually found in things*.” By adding the latter “as” phrase, Kant goes beyond his usual “as if” in joining the actual appearance of things with their original cause, or Being. These two realms, the absolute realm of the “unconditioned” (the etymological meaning of “ab-solute”) and the natural, “conditioned” world, while usually kept apart because “the final end is not an end which nature would be competent to realize ... because it is one that is unconditioned” (98), are nonetheless capable of coming together when, in the case of religion or metaphysics, one realizes that everything contingent must come from somewhere or something that is not contingent. But, while metaphysics or religion can only speculate about such a substratum or God that is separate from what is seen or known, the aesthetic “object” which, as Kant defined it in the first parts of the *Critique*, is no mere object—in fact, it is no object at all—resolves this separation by creating absolute “forms *as they are actually found in things*.” We know this because the “freedom [which is] the root conception of all unconditionally practical laws [which] can extend reason beyond the bounds to which every natural, or theoretical, conception must remain hopelessly restricted” (149) is also the root-cause of everything aesthetic:

This [sc. following the rules of taste] would result in genius being stifled, and, with it, also the freedom of the imagination in its conformity to law—a freedom without which a fine art is not possible. (226)

Kant's notion of "intellectual intuition," which was exemplified above by the idea of the absolute, can thus also be applied to the proper "understanding" of fine art; and all such art, whether beautiful or sublime, can thus be defined as *the world as God (Being) sees it*: "But then it is at least possible to regard the material world as a mere phenomenon, and to think something which is not a phenomenon, namely a thing-in-itself, as its substrate. And this we may rest upon a corresponding intellectual intuition, *albeit it is not the intuition we possess*."²²

²² *The Critique of Judgment*, 66 (emphasis mine).

Fichte: *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*

You are not thinking the in-itself, constructing it originally—you are not thinking it out; indeed, how could you!

Fichte, *Twelfth Lecture*¹

One enters my philosophy by means of what is absolutely incomprehensible. Everything that is comprehensible presupposes a higher sphere in which it is comprehended and is therefore not the highest thing, precisely because it is comprehensible.

Fichte, Letter to Reinhold²

Much has changed in Anglo-American letters since 1984, when David Simpson wrote, in his groundbreaking *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel*, “Again, apart from the accounts in the standard histories, e.g. Copleston, there is very little expository or interpretive work on Fichte in English” (73). And yet, despite the invaluable contributions of Breazeale, Rockmore, Behler, Henrich and others (one should also mention as part of this “revival” of German Idealism Žižek’s work on Schelling³), the analysis/interpretation of Fichte’s aesthetics has lagged in comparison to his more metaphysical or “practical” works after and including the twenty (or more) versions of the first *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794). Part of the reason for this is that Fichte, unlike the other authors studied here, did not devote an entire work (or, in the case of Schopenhauer, a large part of his major opus) to aesthetics, although the three “Letters” we will examine here, one of the three versions of

¹ *The Science of Knowing: J. G. Fichte’s 1804 lectures on the Wissenschaftslehre.*

² *Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. Breazeale, 399, quoted by Judith Norman in “Squaring the Romantic Circle,” *Hegel and Aesthetics*, 138.

³ *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters.*

On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy ("Über Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie"), contain Fichte's most important arguments on this subject.⁴ Indeed, although the noted scholar of German Idealism Dieter Henrich writes that "in Gottlieb Fichte's *Science of Knowledge*, the romantic theory of art and poetry originated,"⁵ there is little discussion of art or aesthetics in the many versions of Fichte's *magnum opus* and, consequently, in the now burgeoning Fichte-criticism, although that is not to say that his metaphysical system is not everywhere implied in the essay we are examining here.

As David Simpson notes in his Introduction to the first English translation of *On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy*, Fichte's essay "is perhaps the most famous of all cases of a journal editor (Schiller) rejecting a distinguished contribution." The reasons for this rejection lie at least partly in a comparison of Schiller's own famous letters on aesthetics with the work that is, in Simpson's words, "written in implicit response" to it—a separate project that will not be undertaken here because Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education* speaks of the absolute in very different terms than the other authors discussed in the present work. We will, however, refer to Fichte's other writings when relevant, including the two other works which bear the same title as the present work in question (which was finally published by Fichte himself five years after the Schiller debacle) and, especially, the later version (1804) of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that Dieter Henrich refers to as "the version that anyone who is interested in Fichte, and in his manner of experimenting with new possibilities for theoretical reconstruction in the philosophy of mind, should read" (240). Indeed, many of the complaints about Fichte's misleading notion of the "I" as absolute (the central reason, it seems, for rejecting Fichte's metaphysics⁶) would be readily dismissed by a careful reading of this important later text.

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First Letter. One of Schiller's major complaints in rejecting Fichte's essay was that the title misleadingly refers to philosophy when it is really largely the spirit in works of art that is discussed. In the first of the essay's three Letters,

⁴ "Über Geist und Buchstab in der Philosophie," Fichte's *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 8, 270–300. "On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy," excerpts collected in *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism* (ed. Simpson). When noted, I also use the translation (by the same translator) collected in *German Idealist Philosophy* (ed. Bubner).

⁵ *Between Kant and Hegel*, 2.

⁶ See, for example, Harris, *The Substance of Spinoza*, 174–6.

for example, it is clearly a question of artistic “spirit” as opposed to “soulless” philosophy that is at issue, despite the Letter’s beginning with the stated goal of providing “a thorough and intelligible explanation of what is meant by the spirit of philosophy and the spirit in philosophy, and how it differs from the letter as such and from the merely literal” (75). Soon after this opening “statement of purpose” Fichte defers that project in lieu of first explaining “what we call spirit in general,” and it is in reference to that question that Fichte discusses art and art only: “This vitalizing force in a work of art we call ‘spirit’ (*Geist*), and its absence spiritlessness (*Geistlosigkeit*)” (77). Although, as mentioned, we will only discuss Fichte’s more overtly “philosophical works”—particularly the various versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*—as background to this essay, we will argue that Fichte’s notion of the absolute is also of paramount importance to his notion of art. In this respect Schiller’s rejection of the Letter as unphilosophical is hardly justified, although it is symptomatic of a separation of art and philosophy “proper” that we are still grappling with to this day.

Fichte’s definition in the *First Letter* of spirit as the “vitalizing force in a work of art” is similar to Kant’s discussion of the same matter some five years earlier in the *Second Analytic* of the *Critique of Judgment* dealing with the “Faculties of the Mind which Constitute Genius”:

Of certain products which are expected, partly at least, to stand on the footing of fine art, we say that they are soulless (*ohne Geist*), and this although we find nothing to censure in them as far as taste goes. A poem may be very pretty and elegant, but is soulless. A narrative has precision and method, but is soulless. A speech on some festive occasion may be good in substance and ornate withal, but may be soulless. Conversation frequently is not devoid of entertainment, but yet soulless. Even of a woman we may well say, she is pretty, affable, and refined, but soulless. Now, what do we mean here by ‘soul’ (*Geist*)? (175/245)

Kant seems to have answered Schiller’s objection here by carefully delimiting his comments and restricting them to “products which are expected to stand on the footing of fine art,” although the delimitation seems to blur when one considers that: a) Kant includes conversation and women in the discussion, neither of which are “expected to stand on the footing of fine art;” and b) this leaves open the question of whether a philosophy of art such as Kant’s own third *Critique*, which includes a lengthy section on the consideration of “first causes” (the third “Analytic of Teleological Judgment” discussed in the preceding chapter), might also blur this distinction. At any rate, Kant’s definition of soul is that of

an “animating principle” (*belebende Prinzip*) that is also an important part of Fichte’s definition of *Geist* as a “vitalizing force” (*belebende Kraft*). But how, Kant continues, are we to define such a feature and, we might add, is such a definition of the animating spirit which constitutes soulfulness itself soulful or soulless (“ohne Geist”)?

Soul (*Geist*) in an aesthetical sense signifies the animating principle in the mind. But that whereby this principle animates the psychic substance (*Seele*)—the material which it employs for that purpose—is that which sets the mental powers into a swing that is final (*ist das was die Gemütskräfte zweckmäßig in Schwung versetzt*), i.e. into a play which is self-maintaining and which strengthens those powers for such activity (*d.i. in ein solches Spiel, welches sich von selbst erhält und selbst die Kräfte dazu stärkt*).

Now my proposition is that this principle is nothing less than the faculty of presenting *aesthetic ideas*. (emphasis Kant’s)

Kant’s notion of “aesthetic ideas,” which he goes on to explain and exemplify at some length (culminating in the footnote to Section #49 on the “veil of Isis”), is his theory of figurative versus literal language, which is precisely the distinction referred to in Fichte’s title between the “Spirit and the Letter”—*Buchstab* is, like the English “literal,” the word for the literal meaning as well as the alphabetic “letter.” Both seem to agree, then, that “soul” (*Geist*) is an animating principle and that this animating principle is more or less synonymous with the poetic/rhetorical capacity for figuration (note Kant’s earlier reference to a “speech on some festive occasion”). One does not have to be as ingenious as Jacques Derrida⁷ or Paul de Man, whose discussion of eighteenth century theories of figuration remains definitive in this regard,⁸ to notice that Kant’s “animating principle,” and his “swing that is final” is itself a catachrestic “metaphor of metaphor”—that is, a “true” (false) metaphor for what can only be described metaphorically. But beyond their agreement as to the importance of figuration in defining the “animating principle” of art, and given the way that Fichte consistently defines his philosophical position as superseding Kant’s, how does Fichte’s definition of soulful (vs. soulless) add to or otherwise differ from Kant’s earlier discussion?

Fichte is not content to define the soul as “nothing but the capacity for presenting aesthetic ideas;” he wants to know more precisely what an aesthetic

⁷ Derrida, “La mythologie blanche,” *Marges—de la philosophie*.

⁸ Paul de Man, “The Epistemology of Metaphor.”

idea, or metaphor, is. That is to say, it is all well and good to say that soulfulness and/or genius is the capacity for producing a good metaphor (indeed, Aristotle had said the same thing more than 2,000 years earlier), or to refer approvingly to “a certain poet’s” soulful simile of virtue as like the radiant sun, but the problem with defining the soul *as* metaphor is that it leaves open the question of what it means that the soul *is* metaphor. To say that the soul is metaphor is to say that ‘the soul is the soul,’ or that ‘metaphor is metaphor,’ because any other definition would be to deny the metaphoricity or soulfulness of metaphor and of the soul. To say that the soul is metaphor is thus also to say that the soul, like metaphor, is never what it is, which is precisely where Fichte’s exploration of the soul extends beyond Kant’s groundbreaking definition that nonetheless falls short in failing to acknowledge the metaphoricity of this very “capacity.”

Fichte, however, does acknowledge this metaphoricity when he states that the interest provoked by matters which directly affect the soul causes one to lose interest in the “real world”:

When your soul (*Geist*) was totally engrossed by what you were reading you had no need to look for any reason beyond reading it for its own sake, and the only thing that troubled you was tearing yourself from it when other duties called you away. Several times you found yourself perhaps in a similar situation to a certain French woman. When the court ball was officially begun, she was reading *La nouvelle Héloïse* ... She read all night long and sacrificed going to the ball altogether. (76)

This is an example of what Kant meant by a disinterestedness which is not, *pace* Nietzsche and other of Kant’s detractors,⁹ a lack of interest but, indeed, its very opposite. But Fichte is also going beyond Kant here in bringing different Kantian notions together in noting how the soul, when “moved,” goes into a sort of trance in which, chiasmatically, the unreality of the book (or artwork) has become the only reality, and objective reality has in turn become unreal. It is also important to note how, with this reversal, the “reality” of art has not become objectively real but, rather, its own artistic reality. Consistent with Fichte’s later notion of an absolute “pure light” that is never any “factual” object of illumination,¹⁰ the immersion here is an immersion in immersion, not in

⁹ More recently there is Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological critique of Kant’s third *Critique* in *Distinction*.

¹⁰ *Science of Knowing* (1804). I agree wholeheartedly with Friedrich Schlegel’s statement that “the *Wissenschaftslehre* is much more critical than it seems to be. Especially the new version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is always simultaneously philosophy and philosophy of philosophy” (*Athanaeum*, Fr. 281).

anything real. This is made clear when Fichte goes on to describe the experience of being “moved” by the work of art as its own sort of “spectacle”:

This much is clear: that a work of the first sort [sc. “soulful”] may excite, stimulate and strengthen our appreciation of and capacity to appreciate its subject matter; that such a work is not simply the object of our intellectual (*geistigen*) engagement, for it gives us at the same time the ability to engage ourselves with it, so that we receive not just the gift but the hand with which we must grasp it. Such a work creates the spectacle and the audience at one and the same time and, like the life-force in the universe, imparts first movement and structure to dead matter and then in the same breathe spiritual life to that structure. (77)

It is fascinating to observe how far Fichte’s statements extend Kant’s thoughts a mere four years after the third *Critique*. The “disinterestedness” of Kant’s “First Moment” of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” is now also characterized by its stimulation of “our appreciation of and capacity to appreciate its subject matter”: we may forget the “real world” when we stand before the palace described in Kant’s *Critique* (“First Moment”), or when reading Rousseau’s *Julie*, but this forgetting is here described as a “remembering” in that we gain a greater interest in that very “object” precisely because we have no real interest in it at all. Although the notion of “art appreciation” has become something of a cliché, Fichte reminds us of its original importance when properly understood as the grounding of knowledge in what is not known, as opposed to what is.

In this “engagement” with the work of art “we receive not just the gift but the hand with which we must grasp it.” This is indeed a curious kind of “engagement,” for we are receiving a hand from another which is our own hand that allows us to grasp a “gift” that comes from the other but is now our own. Similarly, “such a work creates the spectacle and the audience at one and the same time.” Fichte is not referring to a dramatic work (“spectacle”) *per se*, but rather to the way any “living” work of art (like every “living metaphor”) turns the spectator into the very work he is seeing. The artwork is thus here defined as the immersion in something absolute in which the subject/spectator becomes lost in the reality of an object/work that is the reality of the subject/spectator—the subject/object synthesis of every “intellectual intuition” referred to by Kant¹¹

¹¹ *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, 66.

(among others) that will lead Schelling to declare the artwork as the original model and ultimate reality of any absolute “thing-in-itself.”¹²

The reference to “living” works of art (and metaphors) may be a metaphor, but it is a living metaphor—a catachresis—for something—“life”—that cannot be understood literally. As Fichte makes clear in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804, life cannot be understood except in terms of the absolute (it cannot thus, in fact, be *understood* at all), but we will focus here on the way that experience of the absolute, through art, is synonymous with being alive. The notion, à la Descartes, that one is alive if one merely says “I am alive” is directly contradicted by the fact that the *fact* that one says anything, what Fichte refers to as the “factual” (*faktisch*), is synonymous, not with “genetic” (*genetisch*) life, but with death—with dead, inert matter. But this does not mean that Fichte or, for that matter, any of the German Idealists discussed here are rejecting concepts altogether and embracing a vitalism that identifies life with the merely organic. For while the “organic” is clearly identified by Fichte with the absolute, insofar as we are dealing with human experience (*Er-lebnis*) of nature, the merely organic would be no more “life” than the dead concept, for it would totally exclude the experience of “merely living.” No, for Kant, Fichte, Schelling, et al., “idealism” is not opposed to “realism”¹³ for it refers, fundamentally, to the “non-dogmatic” synthesis of thought with nature that, paradoxically, requires nature—which is separate from thought—for thought to be, and thought—which is separate from nature—for nature to be. This is why the absolute—which can only refer to a synthesis of subject and object, thought and reality (nature), is synonymous with being alive, and why art, which stands in relation to the merely organic as a kind of death, is nonetheless a death which is paradoxically the very essence of human life. “Such a work [art] creates the spectacle and the audience at one and the same time and, like the life-force in the universe, imparts first movement and structure to dead matter and then in the same breath spiritual life to that structure”: it is the *spectacle* of art, the creation of an *audience*, that is the essence of life (“like the life-force in the universe”), because art is the spark which first ignites the viewer/listener and “imparts first movement and structure to dead matter.”

¹² In his book on Schelling’s later writings Edward Beach describes Schelling’s “intellectual intuition” as “the highest mode of communion with the Pure Actuality of the Godhead.” *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling’s Philosophy of Mythology*, 101.

¹³ “Do not think of ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ as artificial philosophical systems which the *Wissenschaftslehre* wants to oppose ... through this very contradiction realism’s empirical principle would become genetic, and in this genesis, perhaps it will become the principle of a higher realism and idealism united into one.” Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre* (1804), *12th Lecture*, 95–7.

Both Kant and Fichte refer to the “animating principle” or “force” (*belebende Prinzip/Kraft*) of the *aesthetic* (a word whose etymological reference to the act of perception should now be understood in the specular terms just described), but Fichte deepens our understanding of how such a force works. For Fichte, like Kant, it is essential that we understand this not as understanding, but Fichte approaches art as precisely the act in which the separation of subject from object that is necessary for understanding ceases to inhibit the life force of art:

While looking at his work [sc. that of “the ingenious artist”] I discover with pleasant surprise gifts and talents *in myself* which I didn’t know I possessed. In gauging the effect of his work did he assume these talents in me? Without doubt, for where else would his success come from? *But who revealed to him my innermost being, to which I myself was a stranger?* ... Where is the mysterious connection between such means and such an end, and through what art has he divined what cannot be discovered by any amount of meditation? (77, emphasis mine)

What does Fichte mean by this high-sounding flourish, with which he ends the *First Letter*? Surely not that the “gifts and talents” of a Mozart or Balzac are possessed by their most impassioned spectators—far from it, for it would be truer to state that a sympathetic hearer or reader is made more aware, in the presence of such genius, of her or his own failings. This is, however, no romantic *Schwärmerei*, but the same sentiment uttered long before by Longinus, who proffered the notion that in experiencing the sublimity of a great work of art one feels as if one had written it oneself.¹⁴ What both writers mean by this seemingly strange notion is that the proper appreciation, analysis, or interpretation of a work of art is not the dead, uninspired study of an object or “artifact,” but rather the synthesis (or, following Jean-Louis Chrétien, “communion”¹⁵) in which the subjectivity of the “viewer” is the same as the objectivity of the “viewed,” and vice versa: the artwork is the work, not only of the artist, but of the spectator who creates it, not in the mundane, objective sense of actually creating it, but in the more important sense of realizing a beauty or sublimity that is never either subjective or objective but, as absolute, is both.

Second Letter. Fichte begins the Second Letter by responding to the query which ended the first, namely, how is the artist able to “know” the spectator

¹⁴ “The true sublime uplifts our souls ... just as though we had ourselves produced what we had heard.” *On the Sublime*, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, 107.

¹⁵ *The Call and the Response*.

better than he knows himself in creating a work that informs who he (the spectator) is in ways that even he did not realize? This is not the usual appeal to a 'universal brotherhood of mankind' it might appear to be because, as we just argued, Fichte is referring to the way works of art never address the individual or individual experience but, rather, the underlying unity of people and things *before* they have been divided into separate objects according to the laws of cognition. In other words, when Fichte says that through art "all individual differences in disposition and feeling disappear"¹⁶ this has nothing to do with something that happens *after* the individual (as it were) but *before*: as such, it has nothing to do with bringing individuals together (although it may hopefully be related to that), for it has nothing to do with individuals who do not even exist as such in the more "primitive" work of art.

This explains a rather curious point that Fichte makes in this same passage:

In as much as he is an artist he must have in him that which is common to all developed souls, and instead of the individual disposition which differentiates and divides others from it, the common disposition (*Universalsinn*) of collective humanity, *as it were*, and this alone must dwell in him at the moment of inspiration (*Begeisterung*). *We are all different from one another in many ways. No one person is exactly the same as another, neither as far as concerns his spiritual nor his physical character.* (78, emphasis mine)

If it seems surprising that in the same passage within which he is referring to the way art obviates any barriers or boundaries separating individuals from each other Fichte would call attention not only to physical but "spiritual" differences between all individuals, this is because, again, the "oneness" of the absolute as it appears as art must be individuated in order to exist, just as all things must be individuated in order that they may exist. The oneness of the absolute, in other words, while not requiring the "many" of separate individuals in the abstract, nonetheless requires the existence of the many in order for the non-existence of the one to exist at all. It is for this reason that Fichte, unlike Schiller, holds no hope for any political or social unity in which individual differences are overcome. For, "Giving up the idea of projecting his individuality on others," the artist (vs. the "ordinary man"):

sacrifices it and takes instead those common characteristics which occur in each one of us, molding them to form the individual character of his mind

¹⁶ On the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy," Second Letter, *German Idealist Philosophy*, 106.

(*Geist*) and his work. Therefore what inspires him is called genius ... an essence from a higher sphere in which all lowly and earthly limitations determining the individual character of earthbound men can no longer be distinguished and merge together in a soft haze. (78)

The artist, as opposed to “ordinary” people (including himself), “sacrifices” any political ambition of merging individuals into one and does quite the opposite: he creates an individual work out of the previously existent “common characteristics which occur in each of us.” In other words, he begins with the absolute and creates a work which is absolutely separate and individual while, at the same time, one with every other work (Schelling makes the point in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* that there is only one artwork with many separate iterations¹⁷). The “genius” of the artist, as in Kant, is nothing more nor less than this separation from ordinary reality, not after the fact but before it, i.e. in creating more rules and objective differentiations from the origin from which all rules and objective determinations occurred in the first place, not in ignoring rules altogether:

its [genius'] products must at the same time be models, i.e. be exemplary; and, consequently, though not themselves derived from imitation, they must serve that purpose for others, i.e. as a standard or rule of estimating ... hence, where an author owes a product to his genius, he does not himself know how the ideas for it have entered into his head ...¹⁸

Before there are rules there is that from which such rules arise; before there are limits there is that from which such limits arise—this is the absolute “origin of the work of art” which Fichte refers to as our *Gemeinsinn*, our “common sense”:

Since the means which he uses to awaken and engage this common sense (*Gemeinsinn*), and to silence individuality for as long as he has us under his influence—since these means and the necessary connection which exists between them and their effect cannot easily be discovered by reflection, nor by any reference to their purpose through concepts (*Begriffe*), so only through experience, through his own inner experience of self, can the artist become acquainted with them. (79, emphasis mine)

The very nature of art is to “silence individuality,” for it is by its very nature a communal experience, but Fichte also notes that the ideas which would

¹⁷ “There is properly speaking but one absolute work of art, which may indeed exist in altogether different versions, yet is still only one ...” Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 231.

¹⁸ “Fine Art is the Art of Genius,” *Critique of Judgment*, #46.

be necessary in understanding this experience are necessarily lacking. For objective, “universal” concepts are themselves individuated by virtue of their definitions (a point also made by Diotima), and so any attempt to understand what happens in art would destroy or deny the very thing that one is attempting to understand. Similarly, the absolute, which is synonymous with the work of art for *all* the writers discussed here, can never be individuated, for the moment one identifies it as such it has ceased to be absolute. Nonetheless, as conceptually impoverished as art and the absolute may be, this is because the artwork, rather than referring to anything, proceeds from an “inner experience of self” that is not to be confused with individuality, which has been silenced. Since none of the German Idealists wish to, as philosophers, fall back on mysticism’s arguments “from silence,” what does Fichte mean, exactly, by this “inner experience of self”?

“The artist has already felt what he makes us feel after him, and the same forms which he conjures up before our eyes—regardless as to how they appeared before his own—have already lulled him into that sweet intoxication, that delightful madness which takes hold of us all at his singing, before his vibrant canvas, or at the sound of his flute.” What seems to be a blatant contradiction, that we experience the artist’s experience despite the fact that the artist’s experience may be completely different from our own, holds the key to understanding what Fichte means by the artist’s “inner experience of self.” For the artist is, after all, an individual like us, and as such he too must experience this self individually, just as we all experience the artwork individually. But this individuated experience and understanding only occurs *after* the absolute origin of this experience, which is an “inner experience,” that is, an origin *within* that precedes the emergence of an object *without*.

Because Fichte is talking about this absolute sense of self he then immediately adds to the preceding passage the notion that, after the “sweet intoxication” of this experience, “Cool self-possession returns to him again and with sober artistry he portrays what he saw in his ecstasy in order to draw the whole of mankind into his delusion, the dear memory of which still fills him with sweet emotion ...” One may well wonder whether the transition that Fichte is talking about here is in any way different from what Nietzsche will later refer to as the transition from the Dionysian state of “intoxication” to the “cool self-possession” of the Apollonian that occurs in the creation—or “birth”—of every work of art. Be that as it may (and we will discuss this and other matters regarding Nietzsche’s jaundiced attitude towards German Idealism in general and to

the aesthetic absolute in particular in our concluding chapter on “Nietzsche’s Wrath”), the “cooling off” process Fichte is here describing is the necessary result of a preceding “ecstatic” state of “intoxication,” because experience of the absolute, which can have no existence in itself, must attempt to produce—or better, reproduce—itself. It must do so, because what is seen, or heard, or felt in the state of artistic “inspiration,” while it can never exist as such, is a higher state of existence which precedes the reduction of that state into that of objective, individuated forms, and so must be rendered as faithfully as possible for no other reason than it is that higher, absolute origin of everything. And then, not only will the absolute be made into an object, but that rendering into objective form will be repeated forever, precisely because it is not the absolute that it is: “Wherever there are developed human beings the evidence of his [the artist’s] long-extinguished inspiration will be celebrated by re-enactment *to the end of time*” (emphasis mine).

Fichte realizes that his notion of the *Universalsinn* which is at the basis of aesthetic experience in uniting the soul of the artist with his audience (and, for that matter, with himself), is in need of further explanation. (“But let us jointly examine your argument further, break it down into its finer parts, and trace their development from the roots, so that we can form a definite idea of this common disposition (*Universalsinn*) which you use as the basis of your explanation.”). As we shall now see, and as the rest of the Second Letter confirms, what Fichte needs to clarify is the relation of this *Universalsinn* to the absolute, which has thus far gone unstated as such, and which will in fact continue to appear in the guise of other terms (such as *Trieb*) that nonetheless make their relation to the absolute clear.¹⁹

Let us keep in mind the original goal of Fichte’s three letters, namely, to address the difference between those things which move our “spirits” and those which do not. Fichte is adamant in his insistence that this “spirit” cannot be anything “external” or objective: “You say that totally apart from all external experience and without any outside help the artist develops from the depths of his nature what lies hidden from all in the human soul” (108). *What moves the artist, and his audience, is what is hidden inside him, even from himself.* It is

¹⁹ Errol E. Harris argues that Fichte’s *Trieb*, and its relation to the absolute, is at least partly derived from Fichte’s acknowledged debt to Spinoza:

Here indeed we find Spinozism in Fichte: the primordial absolute and all-inclusive unity of God expressing itself as a power or pure *Vermögen*, self-differentiating into finite modifications or expressions of itself in which its power (“capacity”) becomes a *conatus* (*Trieb*) to actualize that free activity which is the comprehension of the whole. (183)

not anything external (or objective) insofar as it is not identifiable as anything within the soul or without. This “It” can thus never be identified as such, for it lies within any identification as such:

But the one thing in man which is independent and utterly incapable of being determined from outside we call ‘drive’ (*Trieb*). *This and this alone is the single and highest principle governing self-activity (Selbstthätigkeit) in us.* This alone makes us independent observing and acting beings. However much external things may influence us, they do not go so far as to bring out in us something which was not already present in them, nor do they produce an effect contrary to their underlying nature. (79, emphasis mine)

We are “utterly incapable” of “determining this drive or self-activity from outside”; like the dog chasing its own tail, there is nothing we can say about it that does not fail to express it as such by virtue of attempting to express it as such. It is, again, as if one were to try and hold on to something Protean which, in being held, is lost in the very effort to contain it. The temptation is thus not to focus on this nameless drive but, rather, on its effects, since those are as knowable as this ‘drive’ is not—knowledge, through no fault of its own, not only tends to be self-fulfilling in focusing on what is knowable but, moreover, treats everything else (including animals²⁰) as things which don’t exist, or don’t even deserve to exist. German Idealism, however, is everywhere marked by its rejection of this positivism and by its insistence that knowledge is limited by its inability to know all those things which, as I. A. Richards once noted, are most worth knowing—“To this world belongs everything about which civilized man cares most. I need only instance ethics, metaphysics, morals, religion, aesthetics, and the discussions surrounding liberty, nationality, justice, love, truth, faith and knowledge to make this plain.”²¹

However much we may try to ignore this “highest principle,” it doesn’t ignore us, because, as Fichte adds, even the external objective things which seem to influence us are only effects of this underlying, motivating force. Again, it is a cardinal principle of German Idealism that what appears to us to be objective is to be understood as a projection of what is actually within us, and not just within us as something real, but within us as underlying any objective reality *per se*. Everything for us is necessarily a secondary function of this “drive,” which

²⁰ Among the many important recent reconsiderations of the animal, see especially Elizabeth Fontanier’s *Le silence des bêtes*.

²¹ *Practical Criticism*, 5.

is also the reason artworks and other products of the soul move us more than anything external, and why the artwork and other products of the soul just referred to by Richards are never mere objects of understanding.

This “self-activity” (*Selbsttätigkeit*), or “drive” (*Trieb*), is the point of origin of everything external, beginning with the artist’s production of images (*Bilder*):

Self-activity in man, which determines his character and distinguishes him from the rest of nature, placing him outside her laws, must itself be based on something peculiar to him. This peculiarity is drive. A human being is above all human because of drive, and what kind of a person he is depends on the greater or lesser force (*Kraft*) and effectiveness of drive, of the inner living and striving. (79)

Having established Fichte’s cardinal principle of life, what exactly is the artist’s, and the artwork’s, privileged position with regard to this “self-activity”? The production of images (*Bilder*) is not to be understood as a function of anything external to man, although we often tend to view it that way. Images are defined by Fichte as representations (*Vorstellungen*) of themselves, that is, of their own human reality. Such images are representations of our “peculiar” drive or self-activity which are mistaken for realities for the simple reason that the original drive that produces such representative images can never be known as such and thus effectively defers any reality to an object which it is not. Or, stated somewhat differently: the drive produces images which are seen as objects rather than as images because the reality of the drive, which is the reality of the object when all is said and done, is never real, reality (or “thingness”) being a denial of its own basic reality.

Fichte does not, however, deny the importance of the scientific belief in the objective nature of images. Although he is unequivocally adamant and consistent in his insistence that this objective reality is not really objective but, rather, the product of our inner “reality,” the distinctly human process whereby the original image is elevated into an object of knowledge through its denial of its own reality as drive is itself a function of this drive—the drive to finish, to complete, to stabilize, to know, etc. which Fichte refers to as the “knowledge-drive” (*Erkenntnistrieb*):

To the extent that this kind of drive seeks the generation of knowledge we can call it, in this respect and for the sake of clarity and brevity, the ‘knowledge-drive’ (*Erkenntnistrieb*), as if it were one particular *basic drive* (*Grundtrieb*), which it is not. It and all the other specific drives and forces which we may still

call by this name are simply particular manifestations of the one indivisible primary force (*Grundkraft*) in man, and we must be very careful to refrain from interpreting such expressions in any other way, in this or in any other philosophical work. (80; italics in the original, underlining mine)

Fichte is careful to note that this 'knowledge-drive' is not the drive as such, although, for the reasons stated above (i.e. that knowledge only knows itself), we refer to it as the basic drive (*Grundtrieb*), "which it is not." Such confusion rests on the "self-satisfied" nature of a knowledge-drive which is effect-driven and forgets the very drive which is its real reality: "The knowledge-drive accordingly is always satisfied to a certain extent ... In general therefore this drive manifests itself in the effect it produces." In the part of this statement that I have elided, Fichte notes: "Every man has certain cognitions (*Erkenntnisse*), and without them he would be something other than a man." Man is thus defined much as Nietzsche was to define "him," as that which, in knowing himself as such, which he must do to be something and to know anything, forgets himself as such.

As opposed to this "knowledge-drive," "which is always satisfied to a certain extent," there is also an "aesthetic-drive" which "goes in search of a certain particular representation purely for its own sake, and in no way for the sake of a thing which might correspond to it, or just for cognitive knowledge of this thing" (109). Unlike the knowledge drive, which is satisfied with referring something to something else as opposed to knowing what it really is in itself, the aesthetic drive, which can never be satisfied, desires the thing as it really is, absolutely. The human being, to stay with our earlier example, can be known in countless ways by referring to various of its contingencies (it possesses language, and as a result society, reason, etc.), but the human in itself, i.e. what the human being ultimately is or ought to be (e.g. is the human really different from the animal, despite its possession of certain attributes, such as language? etc.), can never be known as such, although the desire for this knowledge, for knowledge or experience of what the human "ought" to be, absolutely, is as real as the acquisition of that knowledge is not. Fichte's "aesthetic-drive," then, is linked to the absolute as a desire to know or experience something as it really is metaphysically, as opposed to epistemologically.

What does this "aesthetic-drive," with its link to knowledge or experience of something (or the thing) in itself, have to do with such pertinent aesthetic matters as beauty, sublimity, figuration, etc.? First, Fichte notes that desire for the object in itself has nothing to do with knowledge of that object, which would always turn the object in question into something *for me* as opposed

to something *in itself*. In other words: to desire the object as it is is not about referring or “harmonizing” that thing to something else, which is what is required of all objects of knowledge:

As far as this [aesthetic] drive is concerned the representation is an end in itself. It does not derive its value from harmonizing with the object—on which no store is set in this connection—but has value in itself. It is not the replication of reality *but a free unrestrained form of the image which is sought*. (81, emphasis mine)

The object that is desired in itself, and which cannot be known or mediated through any knowledge, must also be a “free unrestrained form of the image.” “Image,” not “object,” because object would imply something that is known, whereas image refers to the fact that the desired “object” does not only exist for me but in itself, outside of my control (“unrestrained,” *unabhängigen*). “Image” is of course a word for figuration, and its use here reminds us again that the absolute “in itself” is always an image or figuration (or better, “fulguration”) of something that can never be known as such, as an object. Similarly, beauty, defined by Schelling as the “finite expression of the infinite,” always exceeds any limitation imposed upon “it,” which definition applies equally well, if not more so—to the sublime.

It would seem, then, that the aesthetic “object,” as, Kant was the first to realize, is no object at all and has very little to do with reality, something that might be disheartening if not for the fact that it is objective reality, with its requisite boundaries and limits, that is lacking in the freedom of the aesthetic “object,” a freedom whose ultimate nothingness is only nothing from the point of view of a knowledge defined by limits to this freedom. Yet, one might ask, what about the real objects that art does indeed frequently take as its subject (particularly in the post-mythological “modern” period)?

It can happen that a representation of an object which *really exists* harmonizes completely with the aesthetic drive, but in that case the ensuing satisfaction of this drive is *in no way* concerned with the empirical truth of the representation. The image created would be no less pleasing if it were empty, and it does not give any more pleasure because it happens at the same time to embody cognitive knowledge. (111, emphasis mine)²²

Stated differently, and in Schellingean terms: every work of art is mythological in having nothing to do with empirical reality, even, and especially, when such

²² *German Idealist Philosophy*

referential reality, as in the “realistic novel,” appears to be the “truth of the representation.”

And yet, Fichte is led to ponder, what about the fact that these two very different drives, one of which is to pursue the “object” (which is really a mythological image) as it is in itself, and thereby, one might say, dissolve as subject into that object that can never be possessed as an object, the other of which is to limit the object by dissolving it into the subject as an object-for-me of knowledge, what about the fact that both of these very different, indeed opposing drives, exist within the same being, the being known as “human,” “if both these incompatible drives, one to leave things as they are [sc. the aesthetic] and the other to work upon them everywhere *ad infinitum*, are to unite and present to us a single indivisible man?” Fichte’s answer, which he considers the only possible answer to the ultimate conundrum of man’s desire for myth and his contrary desire for truth, is that “both drives are one and the same and only the conditions of their expression are to be distinguished.” That is, the aesthetic desire for an image is the same as the cognitive desire for an object—indeed, the two even require each other (sc. “The drive could not aim at the representation of the thing without aiming at the representation for its own sake”). The desire to know, in other words, is also a result of the desire for the object in itself.

That being said, the “aesthetic drive” is, and must always remain, invisible: “the aesthetic drive never produces actions (*Handlungen*) that would make it possible to observe them” (82). Fichte is not referring here to those obvious aspects involved in the production of works of art; rather, he is referring to the fact, which follows directly from what has thus far been argued, that the aesthetic drive involves the desire for something in itself that can never be known as such. From this comes Fichte’s statement that the “self-activity” in which the artist creates such an invisible object is accompanied by an equally invisible pleasure, defined as the harmony of subject and object, self and world: “So necessarily the fortuitous harmony in a sentient being, which man must certainly be, between the given [sc. the object] and this tendency of self-activity, must be revealed in man’s overwhelming awareness of self, of his force (*Kraft*) and of his range (*Ausbreitung*), which we call a feeling of pleasure.” “Overwhelming” because it exceeds the self as such in producing an absolute object that makes of the self merely another one of those objects. “*Kraft*” and “*Ausbreitung*” because we are not talking about any object as such, but the force behind any object as such.

Fichte compares this invisible force—the force behind the creation of the aesthetic object that is the real “object” of art—with that of a magnet which

experiences pleasure or “satisfaction” (as it were) in attracting something outside itself:

So let us conceive of a force in a magnet, and of a drive behind this force, a drive to attract anything made of iron which comes within its sphere of influence. Let it really attract a piece of iron: its drive expresses itself and is satisfied, and if we confer upon the magnet the power of feeling then a feeling of satisfaction, i.e. a feeling of pleasure, would necessarily be aroused in it. (82)

Notwithstanding the popularity of such references to magnetism in eighteenth and nineteenth century thought, this particular simile (“So let us conceive ...”) is very apt in describing aesthetic pleasure not as a thing (the mistake made by Burke and other empiricists) but as the satisfaction elicited by the force of attraction in drawing together what is outside with what is within. This description is thus particularly apt in understanding the artistic absolute not as a thing (“This is NOT a pipe!”) but as something underlying any such thing, as the force beyond the subject/object separation that is overcome through this magnetic attraction that “draws an audience,” whether through music, painting, or any of the other arts.

Although Fichte considers his image of the magnet “just like our feeling of aesthetic pleasure”, he adds what he considers a more “fitting image for the aesthetic mood,” that of the nightingale:

Imagine, as you can well do along with the poet, that her soul is pure song; imagine her spirit as a striving to form the most perfect harmony, and its particular notes as the representative images (*Vorstellungen*) of this soul ... Each new chord is on a new rung on the ladder of development and is in harmony with the basic drive of the songster, which she is unaware of; for we have given her no representations other than the notes themselves ... In just the same way the direction of the aesthetic drive lies hidden from our eyes, and we similarly cannot compare the representations developing in us with that which obeys wholly other laws ... this chord does not yet express her whole being, and that pleasure is turned to displeasure in a flash; then both dissolve into greater pleasure with the next note, but return again to drive the singer once more. *Her life floats on the surging waves of aesthetic feeling, as does the life of art in every true genius.* (83–4; emphasis mine)

One will get nowhere if one merely thinks of a bird singing; it is rather the point of Fichte’s comparison (like the magnet, a popular one among writers of the period), the artistic song, or (which is the same thing) the bird’s song as

it is imagined by the poet, that one must keep in mind here. One also understands nothing of what Fichte is saying if one does not apply the notion of art as absolute to the song he is describing. For we must “imagine that her soul is pure song” and “imagine her spirit as striving to form the most perfect harmony.” What is “pure song,” and what is “the most perfect harmony”? Such are, as the end of the passage tells us, “the life of art in every true genius,” but what is that?

The key here, I think, lies in a figure within the figure of the bird singing, namely, that of the ladder: “Each new chord is on a new rung on the ladder of development and is in harmony with the basic drive of the songster, which she is unaware of.” As a figure within the figure we are less likely to confuse the figure with its reality, that which it is a figure *of*, which we are more likely to do in thinking of some actual bird singing. For the soul is here being described as an *elevation* outside itself for which the notes or chords of the song are merely so many “rungs on a ladder.” The soul, which is the same as the artistic soul, which is the same as the artwork (Kant also made all these connections), is that which flies outside itself in climbing towards something outside itself. This something is the absolute, for it can be nothing other than that which is outside me but also that which is the essence, or origin, of what I really am, that from which I came and that to which I must ultimately return. Art, song, poetry, etc. are all merely “means to an end”: that is, objects, notes, etc. that allow us to climb towards the absolute. Objects, notes, etc. within the work of art are able to do this because, unlike their real counterparts, and unlike our own reality, they have no meaning in themselves except as representations of a drive to achieve the absolute (this is why music provides such an apt example), which is all of the absolute we can ever experience. Or, one might say: the minute the song becomes a note or mere notes it ceases to exist as music (which, for that reason, does not exist, or rather exists “beyond and prior to all phenomena,” as Nietzsche rightly argued²³).

The aesthetic drive is also lacking even the more limited degree of objectivity found in the “practical drive” of such things as the worship of God:

So it is easy for the practical drive to make itself known to consciousness in all sorts of ways ... But as far as the aims of the aesthetic drive are concerned, more impediments arise. There seems to be no way of penetrating far enough into the depths of our minds (*Geistes*) to reach it, other than by trying either to reach it through external experience regardless, waiting to see whether and how it will

²³ “Whenever it engages in the imitation of music, language remains in purely superficial contact with it, and no amount of poetic eloquence will carry us one step closer to the essential secret of that art.” *The Birth of Tragedy*, 46.

reveal itself in these conditions ... but one is in danger of confusing a feeling of pleasure based on an obscure, undeveloped, perhaps completely empirical and individual practical consciousness with aesthetic pleasure proper. *And so we are always left uncertain as to whether there is such a drive as that which we have described as the aesthetic, or whether all the things we take to be expressions of it are a subtle delusion.* (84; emphasis mine)

Although one often associates art with religion because of the existence of many explicit religious works of art, or uses the language of religion to describe art, etc., there is no *identity* between the two for the reasons Fichte gives, namely: although there is also no way to plummet the depths of God, we are conscious of this as the very reason for worshipping, whereas there is no name for art or for the art “object” (except for art itself, which therefore leads only to a circular definition) and where there is no name, no word for something, there is no existence. As Heidegger points out in his essay on “The Origin of the Work of Art,” the names for the various forms of artistic expression (painting, film, etc.) often refer to nothing more than mere physical material or activity. Even the “pleasure” which Kant acknowledges is a necessary condition of art is qualitatively different from the empirical pleasures of food, sex, etc. and so utterly unknown to us. All of which leads Fichte to his conclusion that, for all intents and purposes, art (like music, on which all art, as Schopenhauer argued, is based and to which, according to Pater, all art aspires) does not exist except as the delusion that art exists. This is the difference between art and religion, because, whereas religion might appear to be a delusion to those who do not believe, it is anything but for its community of worshippers, whereas art—relatively speaking—does not even exist in the mind of its “believers” or “worshippers”—the quotations thus serve as markers of this non-existence.

On the other hand, the aesthetic drive is directed towards objects of experience in ways that the practical drive is not. That is, while art is capable of including the secular, quotidian world and all that is in it, it is also the case that those same ordinary objects and experiences are not objects of knowledge the way that they are in reality: “aesthetic representations can only develop first and foremost in and by means of experience which is directed towards cognitive knowledge: but then you are confronted by a new difficulty ...” (84), the difficulty, namely, of understanding how and why the objects of ordinary experiences function as art “objects” that are in no way ordinary.

To understand the relation of art “objects” to knowledge one must first better understand what knowledge is—one must, in other words, know knowledge, i.e.

philosophize. But before one achieves this level of philosophical self-awareness, in which one reflects on what one is reflecting on, there is a less philosophical knowing that precedes it: “Even knowledge is not in the first place sought for its own sake, but for a purpose beyond it. At the first level of development, both of the individual and of the whole species, the practical drive in its baser expression outstrips all others ...” “Aesthetic impressions” begin when those same ordinary objects are removed from their practical function, just as philosophy begins when thinking begins thinking about thinking about something. *Contemplation* (*Kontemplation*), the term Kant had used to explain his notion of aesthetic “disinterestedness,” is also used by Fichte to describe a way of thinking without any specific purpose, plan or direction:

We can observe and linger over our contemplations, and abandon ourselves during this leisurely and liberal contemplation to aesthetic impressions, even if it must be cold-bloodedly, without reference to the needs of the moment, and even with the danger of going astray. (85)

If one were to ask what is the purpose of this contemplation, one would have to answer none, since that is the very thing that distinguishes it. But this does not mean, as it does from the perspective of more cognitive or practical thinking, that such aesthetic thinking is vacuous; indeed, from the perspective of such aesthetic thinking it would be cognitive or practical thinking that is vacuous, limited as it is by the vulgar application of thinking to some real need or concern. Viewed from its own perspective aesthetic thinking is real thinking insofar as it is in no way limited by anything and, therefore, capable of everything. In terms of the existence of the work of art, this means that art, as contemplation, is pure knowledge, i.e. philosophy, for it is freed from anything practical or known in lieu of what is of no use to us except as pure contemplation. The novel or epic, for example, gives us no practical knowledge of, say, how to fight a war, or how to build a boat, or how to fulfill one’s amorous desires, but, at the same time, the novel or epic tells us more about such matters than can be understood logically, cognitively, or practically.

Hence, the work of art represents a higher form of knowledge, that is freed from any practical or cognitive limit—Fichte notes, in this regard, that art is thereby synonymous with freedom and so a danger to any kind of totalitarian oppression: “Hence the periods and regions of serfdom (*Knechtschaft*) are also those of tastelessness; and it is on the one hand inadvisable to allow men to be free before their aesthetic sense is developed, so on the other hand it is impossible to

develop it before they are free.” Although Fichte makes the important connection between political and aesthetic freedom, Fichte also notes, in obvious contrast with Schiller, that it is absurd to think that an “aesthetic education” (*ästhetische Erziehung*) will lead to an appreciation of the importance of political freedom when aesthetic freedom requires such freedom already:

Thus the idea of elevating men through aesthetic education to be worthy of freedom, and to freedom itself, will get us into a vicious circle if we do not find beforehand a means of arousing the courage of the individual amongst the throng to be neither the master nor the slave of anyone. (85)

While differing from Schiller’s position, which is like Plato’s in viewing art as a means rather than as its own end, nonetheless it is the case that there can be no genuine art without freedom, political or otherwise.

Despite the fact that there can be no knowledge of the absolute nor of the free artworks that emanate from it, this does not mean that art or the absolute is not related to knowledge. Indeed, the pure desire for knowledge, “knowledge for knowledge’s sake,” which must be freed from all practicality or even objectivity, is precisely what is at stake in the art object as such:

As soon as that pressing urgency is removed, no longer driving us to snatch up greedily any possible mental acquisition only to be able to expend it when the need dictates, the drive for cognitive knowledge is aroused for the sake of knowledge itself. We begin by letting our inner (*geistig*) eye wander over objects and linger awhile; we look at them from several angles without considering a possible use for them, and take the risk of making a dubious assumption only to await the right explanation in peace. (86)

What Fichte is describing here as “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” joins with the aesthetic in an arts-based, “humanistic,” “liberal arts” education: “We have taken the first step in separating ourselves from the animal in us. Liberal-mindedness comes into being—the first degree of humanity” (86). If art does not produce knowledge that is simply because it *is* knowledge—that is, it is the act of knowing as opposed to the limitation of that freedom to a particular object or fact of knowing. This is why art is capable of producing so much knowledge (for example, the countless critical works of interpretive genius of just one play by one author among all the other works of interpretive genius of that author—not to mention all the others!) without ever producing even the smallest bit of knowledge that is practical, limited, or objective.

Reality, which constitutes the essence of all knowledge, is thus not totally

irrelevant to the freedom of aesthetic contemplation, it is merely freed from the limitations of any reality as such. Fichte devotes the final pages of the Second Letter to a vivid description of this absolute reality:

During this peaceful and unmotivated contemplation (*Betrachtung*) of objects, when our mind (*Geist*) is secure *and not keeping a watch on itself*, our aesthetic sense develops *with reality as its guide* without our having anything to do with it. But after both have gone down the same path for a distance, it breaks loose at the parting of the ways and continues unaccompanied by reality. (86–7, emphasis mine)

As we shall see in the following two chapters, Schelling is more philosophical in his writings on art in describing the aesthetic absolute as an extreme form of freedom that, in being freed from itself, embraces an object that is no longer what it was (the inherent doubling of aesthetic figuration²⁴). Similarly, for Fichte, the aesthetic realm is not removed from the world of objects, just as the world of art is not removed from the world of objects; rather, such objects are merely separate from their reality and any “use-function” (Kant’s notion of “disinterestedness”), just as the subject itself is separate from its practical reality (“our mind is secure and not keeping a watch on itself”). Because the aesthetic experience Fichte is here describing is not about a subject or object as such but, rather, about an absolute synthesis in which they both exist as one, there can be no stopping the “parting of the ways” in which reality is abandoned, for (to use Schelling’s language here) the “sub-ject” (subject + object) is in reality a synthesis of both subject and object in which the reality of the object as such (or, for that matter, the subject as such) is as of yet non-existent. Put differently: art expresses the absolute “existence of existence” before it comes into existence.

Fichte’s description continues:

Thus your eye often rested on the land in the west of your country dwelling. If you could look at it completely disinterestedly (*ohne alle Absicht*), not trying to see how you might escape the night attacks of bands of thieves, then you would not just see the green grass and *beyond that* the different sorts of clover and *beyond that* the tall corn, and commit to memory what was there; but your contemplative eye would linger with pleasure on the fresh green of the grass,

²⁴ “This double unity of every idea is actually the mystery by which the particular can be comprehended both within the absolute and, in spite of this, also as a particular.” *The Philosophy of Art*, 35. See also *The Critical Double*, which defines aesthetic truth as “that which denies itself as such.”

would look further at the numerous blossoms of the clover, and would glide softly over the rippling waves of the corn towards the heights beyond. There ought, you would say, to be a little village ... But you would not desire to have a house in the village ... [For] It would have been just the same to you if, without your knowing it, someone had conjured up what you wished for by means of some optical illusion. (87; emphasis mine)

Unlike Kant, for whom the distinction between aesthetic beauty in nature and in art is never made, Fichte is not really interested in this pastoral phantasy *per se*, for, as he makes clear, it is meant as an allegory of aesthetic pleasure: "You see in this example a short history of the development of our whole aesthetic faculty." In this sense, the example performs what Fichte is arguing, for just as the imagined viewer is incessantly going beyond the reality he perceives until the reality of the scene ceases altogether ("It would have been just the same to you if, without your knowing it, someone had conjured up what you wished for by means of some optical illusion"), Fichte is "conjuring up" this example whose reality "ceases altogether" in lieu of the allegory of aesthetic satisfaction. This is critical, because the essence of Fichte's aesthetic, of the living spirit (*Geist*) versus the dead letter, is that of an illusion which only comes alive when the dead reality that we mistakenly call "life" ceases to exist. That is, the contemplative aesthetic experience Fichte is here describing is a process of going beyond every posited limit, including *that* limit, so as to include, for at least a moment, the limits of everyday experiences such as this.

"Beyond that": Fichte repeats this phrase here (*hinter ihr; hinter diesen*) because he is trying to express a beyond that is, literally, "beyond beyond," for even as he moves the eye beyond these three parts of the landscape (the clover beyond the grass and the corn beyond that), he then moves beyond these in turn by adding that one would then see the green of the grass, the flowers of the clover, and the sky above the corn. And, then, he moves us beyond *that* by populating this empty landscape with a village, only to then deny this addition by noting that you would not really want to live there, because you are merely imagining everything. The point, again, of this allegory of aesthetics is that the reality that is posited at every step of the way is denied at every step of the way, because the essence of aesthetic contemplation, the absolute, is never the same as the very reality which, as absolute, it is, which is the very essence of representation (*Vorstellung*) as the mimetic recreation of something in other terms than what it really is.

Fichte confirms this analysis in his own assessment of the preceding allegory:

You see in this example a short history of the development of our whole aesthetic faculty. During peaceful contemplation, which no longer concerns itself with knowledge of what has been long recognized, but which extends as it were further out beyond the object, the aesthetic sense develops in the soul at rest, when intellectual curiosity (*Wissbegierde*) has been stilled and the knowledge-drive has been satisfied. (87)

Fichte attacks “intellectual curiosity,” not because he denies its value or even its relevance to aesthetics, but because the desire to know what something is, while certainly applicable to the art object or the experience of experiencing the art object, is secondary when compared to the unlimited freedom of aesthetic contemplation just described: “Out of this contemplation, which still continues to hold on to the thread of reality but wherein we are no longer concerned with the real nature of things, but rather with their oneness with our spirit, the imagination, born to be free, soon attains total freedom.” There could not be a better statement than this to show Fichte’s understanding of the aesthetic absolute, despite his not using the term here. All that need be added is that “one continues to hold on to the thread of reality” because the art *object* is precisely that: an “object” in name only, separate from itself as such—its reality—and “one with our spirit.”

Because the spirit (*Geist*) is not concerned with the reality of the object but, rather, with how it “ought to be according to the requirements of this [aesthetic] drive,” the faculty which judges such matters is not logical or scientific but one of “taste” (*Geschmack*):

Through spirit the sphere of taste, which is confined within the bounds of nature, is enlarged. The products of spirit create new objects and further develop taste, albeit without elevating it to the status of spirit itself. Everyone can cultivate taste, but it is doubtful whether everyone can raise himself to the level of spirit. (88)

Taste, in other words, is the knowledge of the reality of an artwork or other aesthetic experience, which artwork or aesthetic experience is not ultimately known or, for that matter, even real. As such it can be cultivated in ways that the spirit cannot, because spirit (*Geist*) is that power we have described above as always moving outside any such limitations or, to use a temporal as opposed to spatial metaphor, as always existing before any awareness of what the aesthetic object is.

Whether in matters of taste, or philosophy, or art, spirit thus traffics in the

idea or *ideal* understood by Fichte and the other German Idealists not as the subjective basis of experience but, rather, as the objective basis of experience understood as necessarily subjective. Idealism is thus led to its realization that the work of art, which is never subjective, is the reality of objective experience insofar as it represents reality as it really is before it has become either subjective or objective—that is, as the Idea:²⁵

The infinite and unlimited objective of our [aesthetic] drive is called the ‘idea,’ and in as much as a part of it may be presented as a sensible image (*Bild*), then it is called the ‘ideal.’ Spirit is therefore a faculty of the ideal.

Spirit leaves the bounds of reality behind it, and in its own special sphere there are no bounds. The drive to which it is entrusted passes into the infinite; through it the spirit is led ever onwards from one vista to another, and when it has attained the goal it had in view new horizons open up to it. *In the pure, clear aether of the land of its birth there are no vibrations other than those it creates with its own wings.* (88, emphasis mine)

It is surprising that Schiller would have failed to see the philosophical value of Fichte’s argument here, despite his otherwise valid objection that it seemingly departs from its title in dealing with art rather than philosophy *per se*. For, as this final passage makes clear, art, or the “aesthetic drive,” is the essence of the spirit of philosophy before it has devolved (as it will in Hegel) into the privileging of mind over matter, when it is really mind as matter—the spirit’s own “vibrations”—that is the essence of the Idea, and of the aesthetic absolute.

Third Letter. Fichte’s Third Letter returns to the question posed at the outset: how is the artist able to inspire his audience with his particular creations? This is only really a problem, however, if one fails to understand the essence of the aesthetic drive which, as Fichte understands it, is an expression not of any individual but of the absolute unity or “oneness” which exists, scientifically, before there is any individual: “What the inspired man finds in his breast lies in every human breast, and his capacity is the common capacity (*Gemeinsinn*) of the whole species” (88). Although not as rich or lengthy as the preceding Letter (and often, for that reason, ignored in the commentaries), the Third Letter offers up considerable insight into the “inspiration” provided by this aesthetic absolute, or *Gemeinsinn*.

If one starts from the premise that art is an expression of the absolute then a

²⁵ In the chapter of this work on Schopenhauer his redefinition of the Platonic Idea in aesthetic terms is described in more detail.

consensus with other human beings—spectators, audience, the public at large, etc.—is already assured, and the problem of how art inspires its audience is solved: “My work,” Fichte has the artist declare, “is created from the richness of human nature, therefore it must and ought to please everyone who is a part of that, and it will be immortal, like human nature itself” (89). This does not, however, preclude the possibility—indeed, the necessity—of other, less absolute concerns (doubt, vanity, financial need, etc.) emerging to confront the otherwise indifferent artist: “Nevertheless he questions and investigates carefully, in the dark forebodings of anxious hours, whether others believe the same thing, and at such times he might well need such a lightly valued support as the agreement of others.” Why, in other words, would the agreement of others be of concern to the artist when, as Kant had previously argued with his notion of “subjective universality” in which an artwork is only beautiful if it is perceived as such for everyone (“Second Moment”), the artwork is *already* an expression of this agreement with all others? Because, as an expression of the absolute, the artwork does not even relate to the individual artist him/herself, and so, to the extent that the individual artist is an individual artist, he will be led to add to his creation other, extraneous factors that are not, in fact, germane to the artwork as such:

Partly to test out this [absolute] sense on others, and partly to communicate to them what is so attractive to it, the genius dresses the forms which appear undisguised before his spiritual eye in more tangible elements, and presents them thus to his contemporaries ... (88) He is sure of his case and of the spirit which dwells within him *without his having had anything to do with it*; but out of respect for it he wants it to be recognized and respected by others. It is the same with everything that we accept just because of our feeling (*Gefühl*) and can only believe. When everyone present unanimously assures us that an object which we believe we have glimpsed is not there, then, if we are at all aware of the illusions created by our senses and our imagination, we become confused and begin *to look in ourselves* for the reason behind this phenomenon. We believe much more strongly in our inner feeling, but we like even this to be supported by the feelings of others. (89, emphasis mine)

Fichte’s initial question, then, might well be turned around: rather than asking why certain artistic works inspire us and others do not, we might rather ask why so many works—even genuine ones—leave us cold. Fichte’s answer here is compelling: since the artist traffics not in contingencies but in an absolute which is impossible to ever know as such (“No language has found the words for it, and

if they were found then the pregnant fullness of its life would be lost,” 89), the artist and the spectator, to the extent that they are human and therefore separate from the absolute, are bound to doubt the absolute which stands in opposition to the self which, as Descartes maintained, is the very source of logical certainty. One might even extend this notion to include philosophies which deal with this absolute—German Idealism, Heidegger, Nietzsche, psychoanalysis, etc.—as particularly vulnerable to such doubts and questions of reception given the very nature of their work.

As in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804, where Fichte consistently defines the absolute as “life,”²⁶ Fichte here describes the aesthetic object as “living action”:

and just as for all ordered activities of the human spirit, its [art’s] free exercise must have an object to work on in which its inner nature is revealed through the way it operates. Thus, the fundamental principle of *sound* exists in the harmonious pulsations and *vibrations* of the string, which would produce and determine one another, fulfill their inner potential, and even form the note to just the same extent in a vacuum. But only in the surrounding air do they have an external medium for creating their effect. They impress themselves on it and reproduce themselves again and again until they reach the ears of the delighted listener; and it is from this marriage alone that the sound which echoes in our soul is born. In the same way the inspired artist expresses the mood of his nature (*Gemüthes*) in a *flexible* physical form, and the motion action and continuity of his forms is the expression of the inner *vibrations* of his soul ... He lent his soul to dead matter so that it could communicate itself to us. (90, emphasis mine)

One is reminded here of Fichte’s important use of the underlined “vibrations” in the conclusion of his preceding Letter: “In the pure, clear aether of the land of its [Spirit’s] birth there are no vibrations other than those it creates with its own wings.” But the operative term here, I would argue, is Fichte’s reference to “flexible.” For there can be no sound (nor, indeed, sight), without a certain curvature which enables these vibrations of the soul to occur. Nor, one could argue, is there any possible *understanding* of such curvature without straightening out the curve into a line, understanding being understood as something straight ($A = A$) which, as just mentioned, must destroy or contradict the very object it is referencing (notions of differential calculus, quantum physics and parabolic curvature notwithstanding—the latter, which would explain the linear

²⁶ E.g. “By recognizing the absolute immanent life we negate intuition as something that is genetically explicable and that plays a part in a system of purely genetic knowledge.” Eleventh Lecture, *The Science of Knowing*, 91.

as the point of contact between the circle and the line, being particularly relevant to a discussion of the point of contact between art and science). This reference to flexibility also helps us to distinguish what Fichte is saying here about music, or artistic sound, from mere sound as such, for while it is the case that all music requires sound the converse is most certainly not the case. Similarly, while the soul always “vibrates”, it is not at all the case that all vibrations are soulful. It is, however, the case that such soulful vibrations are the very essence of the matter here, referring as they do to the difference referred to in Fichte’s title between works which vibrate, which “move” us, and those which do not.

These “flexible vibrations” of the soul are the abovementioned “living activity” in which something happens that, in happening, ceases to exist in its happening. Music is thus merely one (albeit important) way to describe this essential aspect of all art—like music, all art is based upon a vibration that happens in the interstices (or caesuras) of itself, and of its thought. This is why anything can be a work of art, but the work of art cannot be anything. Moreover, it is why the vibrations Fichte is here describing are not vibrations as such but, rather, the trace of anything as such. And, finally, these sounds that are vibrations of the soul are traces of the absolute insofar as the absolute can never be anything else.

“The inner mood of the artist is the spirit (*Geist*) of the work he creates, and the contingent forms in which he expresses it are the embodiment or the letter (*Buchstab*) of it. It is here that the need for artistic technique comes in” (90). In expressing the absolute, the artwork must deny the “contingent” reality or form in which it is expressed, while, at the same time, “artistic technique” is to be understood as necessary to create an object (whether or words, or sounds, or colors, etc.) that is not the reality of the object itself:

People have often confused this facility of artistic technique with spirit itself. It is certainly the determining condition for the expression of spirit, and anyone who sets to work must already have acquired it; but it is not spirit. Through it alone nothing but an empty strumming is produced, a play of sound which is nothing more than just that, which does not rise up to ideas (*Ideen*), and at most expresses a willfulness (*Muthwillen*) and a wasted energy which secretly one wishes could have been put to better use. It is true that the lightest and most careless brushstroke executed by the true genius will have a veneer of those ideas. But the mere technician will never with his highest skills produce anything but a mechanical work, which at the very most might induce one to marvel at its structure. (90)

This reference to “a mechanical work” relates to Kant’s distinction between the work of fine art, as opposed to craftwork, which, no matter how “charming” and “agreeable,” ceases to transcend the level of the material and the work necessary to refine it.²⁷ Fichte’s point here, like Kant’s, is more important than the commonplace notion regarding technique versus genuine artistry, as evident in his statement that the true artist can, with a mere brushstroke, achieve a level of artistic perfection that the most polished, labored work of technical skill will never attain. This is because the brushstroke, or note, like the letter (*Buchstabe*), follows from (rather than precedes) an absolute “spirit” which is entirely separate from the material reality which has no other *reality* than that of its material, objective embodiment. The “confusion” Fichte describes (“People have often confused this facility of artistic technique with spirit itself”) is thus understandable given the tendency for reality to affirm itself in the same way that knowledge believes objective, logical reality is all that exists, and for the absolute to *deny itself as such*, which, as we have previously deduced, it must always do.

If Fichte’s numerous references to “spirit” strike our modern ears with the very lifelessness it is his goal to oppose, he also uses another, less obvious term for this idea: *Stimmung*, “mood.” Referencing Goethe’s genius Fichte writes:

With the same simplicity of plot, and same facility and nobility of language [evident in Goethe’s masterworks], it is possible to produce a very insipid, bland and feeble work. It is the mood (*Stimmung*) which dominates in these works ... With pleasure we find ourselves placed in a world in which alone such a mood is possible, and in a society all of whose members are upright and benevolent, and whose divisions are not caused by bad will but by the storms of adverse fate, for we can never be indifferent to injustices brought about by free beings ... [versus] the slight smile brought about by the blows of irrational nature. (91)

The moving “spirit” or “mood” of Goethe’s work (Fichte is referring in particular to his *Iphigenia*) is ascribed not to any formal or otherwise objective determination but, rather, to a sense of agreement, uniformity, oneness, which overrides even the catastrophe of a father’s sacrificing his own daughter. Because the subject of Goethe’s play is not the “injustices brought about by free beings” but, rather, the absolute sense of harmony that overrides this catastrophe, the

²⁷ “Taste that requires an added element of charm and emotion for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, has not yet emerged from barbarism.” *The Critique of Judgment*, 65.

artwork succeeds in producing “the slight smile brought about by the blows of irrational nature.” This sense of the positive “mood” which is brought about by a work of art that conveys the absolute explains, if it needs explaining, the ultimate connection between the “beautiful” and the “sublime,” for both are expressions of the same mood or uniformity despite the one’s expressing the persistence of the object within the absolute and the other’s the destruction of the object within the same supersensible force of nature.

This confusion regarding the so-called opposition between the beautiful and the sublime, which exists precisely because the art *object* is, in either case, destroyed in the work of art, is also the source of other confusions, such as that mentioned earlier between form, structure, technique, etc. and the work itself, whose own reality as mood, spirit or absolute is none of these. Regarding this confusion between “spirit” and “letter”:

Such craftsmen are literalists (*Buchstäbler*) ... Let Pygmalion place his statue-come-to-life before the eyes of jubilant people; he ought, for nothing prevents us from enlarging upon the legend—to have given her, as well as life, the secret advantage of being seen as living only by those full of spirit (*von geistvollen Augen*), remaining cold and dead for the common and the dull ... a man who also knows how to wield his chisel measures exactly the proportions of the statue with ruler and compasses, goes away, prepares his work, puts it next to that of the artist—and there are many who can find no difference between the two. (92)

There are many interesting twists in this “enlarging” of the Pygmalion myth. First, and I think foremost, is the reference to the necessary doubling that occurs when art is falsely confused with what it is not—in this case, when the mere, lifeless statue with its technical perfection is confused with the living work of art, for which the Pygmalion myth is a sort of emblem. The problem with this particular myth is that it implies that the true work of art is ever anything other than a living being, and that the living statue of Pygmalion is really alive. And yet, for this very reason we can retain the myth as the truth about art in its necessarily falsified form, for the absolute work of art is necessarily always denied by its own reality. Between the question of “inspired,” or inspired, versus lifeless works of art that is Fichte’s main concern here, and the question of living versus dead metaphors, and the question of living versus dead statues, there is no difference, for all are expressions of the same questions created by the living reality of the lifeless work of art. If the living, spiritual part of art is

inseparable from its lifeless counterpart, this is not because it is itself lifeless, but because it is always separate from itself and from anything we can ever know: “But the unploughed fields of our minds are nevertheless opened up, and if for other reasons one day we decide in freedom to take possession of them, we find half the resistance removed and half the work done” (93, the final statement of Fichte’s essay). That is to say, the absolute can never be known, but our resistance to it can be overcome by the “lifeless” half that we do know, as in the work of art, or the metaphorical “reality” on which it is based.

Schelling I: *The System of Transcendental Idealism*

Ein französischer Philosoph sagt: Wir hätten seit dem Sündenfall aufgehört, die Dinge an sich anzuschauen.¹

(According to a French philosopher, we have ceased to see things-in-themselves since the Fall.)

The defining characteristic of the movement from Kant to the later Idealists and “Jena Romantics” is often seen as the rejection of many of the boundaries and divisions *between* the three *Critiques* and *within* the three *Critiques* (e.g. the misleading division between the beautiful and the sublime in the third *Critique*). Of particular concern here is the movement beyond Kant’s separation of teleology—and the absolute—from the “objective world,” and therefore also from the objective determinations of that world as they appear in the work of art: “Unlike Kant, however, he [Schelling] also holds that there can be a going beyond those limits, whereby the mind directly encounters the transrational ground of all existence.”² As Žižek notes, also, “Schelling ventures a crucial step further than Kant ... [when] in this act of free self-positing ... man tears the chain of causal necessity asunder [and] he touches the absolute itself as the primordial abyss-origin of all things.”³ Repeatedly referring to what he calls the fundamental philosophical problem of how to understand the relation of thought to things, subject to object, form to content, etc.,⁴ Schelling says in

¹ *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus* (1795), 126. Schelling is referring here to Condillac, and to a “prelapsarian” state that corresponds to Kant’s “intellectual intuition” in Schelling’s own philosophy.

² Edward Beach, *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling’s Philosophy of Mythology*, 102. Cf. also his statement that “Even Kant, Schelling observed, had experienced the shuddering of awe when confronted with the notion of the absolute source of all existence, but he had erred in placing this experience outside the bounds of philosophy” (101–2).

³ *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, 19.

⁴ E.g. “Nur dadurch, dass wir aus dem absoluten heraustreten, entsteht der Widerstreit gegen

the Introduction to one of his first major works, *The System of Transcendental Idealism* of 1800:

There is but one such activity [sc. that resolves this problem], namely the aesthetic, and every work of art can be conceived only as a product of such activity. The ideal work of art and the real world of objects are therefore products of one and the same activity; the concurrence of the two without consciousness yields the real, and with consciousness the aesthetic world. The objective world is simply the original, as yet unconscious poetry of the spirit; the universal organon of philosophy—and the keystone of its entire arch—is the philosophy of art.⁵

Since realism fails to explain its relation to the absolute it falls to the work of art to reveal reality's (or nature's) link to the "absolute source of all existence," which Spinoza had referred to as nature's "immanent principle" (a notion which Schelling parleyed into his own later *Naturlehre*, but which is also at work in his theory of art⁶). It is for this reason that Schelling refers here to "the philosophy of art" as the "keystone" of all philosophical understanding. It is also why, in his Introduction to the subsequent work devoted entirely to *The Philosophy of Art* (1805), Schelling writes: "Nothing of that which a baser sensibility calls art can concern the philosopher. For him it is a necessary phenomenon *emanating directly from the absolute*, and only to the extent [that] it can be presented and proved as such does it possess reality for him" (4). Art, I will maintain, is *a*, if not *the*, key to the problem which Andrew Bowie, quoting Manfred Frank, cites as the "fundamental thought" in Schelling:

Manfred Frank talks of the "Schellingian fundamental thought, according to which being or absolute identity [i.e. the absolute] is irreducible to the

dasselbe, und nur durch diesen ursprünglichen widerstreit im menschlichen Geiste selbst der Streit der Philosophen ... Denn es (sc. alle Philosophie) entsteht nur durch jenen Widerstreit." *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus*, 46.

⁵ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* 12.

⁶ Schelling's notion of the absolute, Errol E. Harris argues, is derived from Spinoza:

Then, Schelling continues, no limited individual has its ground of being in itself, for all are equal in essence (the absolute identity is the same in each) and the being of every limited individual derives from the Absolute. Here, once more, we have pure Spinoza. (193)

As Dalia Nassar states:

his [Schelling's] insistence on the absolute I, and his understanding of intellectual intuition as absolutely non-objective, are the first steps toward a conception of nature as productive, as a self-causing cause, in which all parts are active participants. ("Schelling's early conception of intellectual intuition," in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, 154.)

happening of reflection.” A major task will be to explicate the implications of Frank’s apt, but oracular, phrase.⁷

The following two chapters will focus, respectively, on these two relatively early works of Schelling in order to understand the relation of the work of art to the absolute, a fundamental rethinking and reevaluation of the aesthetic that began with Kant and reaches its culmination (for the purposes of the present work) in Hegel’s famous dictum, which runs directly counter to Schelling, Fichte and Schopenhauer, that art is at best an inadequate expression of the absolute. Art thus becomes, for Hegel, a “thing of the past” because it has been superseded by philosophy rather than, as Schelling maintained, philosophy being superseded by art for the very same reason. (It is certainly true, but irrelevant to the point in question, that Schelling’s emphasis on what I am calling the “aesthetic absolute” is most pronounced in the two works in question.⁸) In this respect the present work might be said to inject an element of suspense into its trajectory which can only be resolved in its concluding chapters, where Hegel’s claim to remove the absolute from the realm of the aesthetic is carefully examined in the *Lectures on Fine Art*, in the more philosophically definitive *Encyclopedia*, and in the light of Schopenhauer’s notion that: “The poet, however, apprehends the Idea, the inner being of mankind outside all relation and all time, the adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself at its highest grade.”⁹ If it turns out that Kant, Schelling, Schopenhauer and Fichte, and not Hegel, were right concerning art’s relation to the absolute, and that Schelling was right “in arguing that Hegel’s idealistic reductionism was particularly inappropriate when applied to the explication of religious [and, we might add, aesthetic] phenomena,”¹⁰ then it will be impossible to avoid the conclusion that something went terribly wrong in the history of aesthetics, and, as a result, in the history of philosophy in general. As Bowie writes: “The continuing power of the conception of ontological difference in Schelling, evident in the reappearance of Schellingian arguments in recent theory, makes it perhaps more appropriate to regard him, rather than Hegel, as the archetypal philosopher of modernity.”¹¹

⁷ Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 12.

⁸ “The System of Transcendental Idealism of 1800 ... sees art as the medium in which the activity of thought and the ‘unconscious’ productivity in nature can be understood as ultimately the same.” Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 13. For more on Schelling’s supposed shift away from art, see the Preface to this work, in which I discuss Dalia Nassar’s discussion of same in her recent book *The Romantic Absolute*.

⁹ *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 245.

¹⁰ Edward Beach, *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling’s Philosophy of Mythology*, 88.

¹¹ Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 140. Žižek is more ambivalent regarding the “Hegel vs. Schelling” debate. While acknowledging that “whereas Schelling introduced a gap which



The explicit statements just referred to concerning the work of art in its relation to the absolute occur at the very beginning of the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, only to return at the very end (Part VI, 218–33) of Schelling's first great "systematic" work. We will now focus our attention on certain intervening sections of Schelling's work that will help us to understand this relation before returning to its explicit enunciation at the end of Schelling's treatise. In Part Two of the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, "The General Deduction of Transcendental Idealism, after Fichte" (34–41), Schelling deduces a relation to the absolute which explains its relevance despite the purely subjective, "idealistic" nature of all thought "after Fichte." According to Schelling it is precisely because "The self is everything that is" that "The self is *unlimited* as a self"—sc. "absolute" (38). Because, as Schelling states at the outset of this deduction, "*Through the act of self-consciousness the self becomes an object to itself*" (36, emphasis Schelling's), the self is inherently divided from itself as itself¹² and thereby at once limited and unlimited, "real" and "ideal," finite and limited, constrained and free:

If the self is not originally an object, it is the opposite of an object. But now everything objective is a fixed and static thing which can do nothing itself, but is merely the object of doing. Hence the self is originally mere activity. The concept of an object, moreover, includes the concept of something limited or restricted. In becoming an object, everything objective *ipso facto* becomes finite. The self, therefore, is originally (beyond the objectivity posited in it through self-consciousness) infinite—and so is *infinite* activity. (36, emphasis in the original)

Schelling, like many of his contemporaries, and unlike the "straw man" frequently attacked by the "anti-Idealists," is keenly aware of the inherent

opens a way for the post-Hegelian problematic of finitude: the Hegelian Idea can comprehend only the ideal necessity of a thing ..." he immediately retracts this by saying: "Is this comprehension of the Hegelian dialectical process as the self-mediation of the Notion ... adequate? Our premise, of course, is that it is not." *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, 6. Nonetheless, it must be added that Žižek's reading of Schelling's absolute is very positive and very close to the one proffered here, although his focus is on the *Weltalter* drafts and he ignores Schelling's emphasis on art.

¹² I have elsewhere utilized this same formula as "the critical double," sc. the essential trope of aesthetic, figurative meaning. Schelling's formulation of this same notion, with which I was not then familiar, is repeated throughout his work at various stages to describe the absolute (cf. Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 130). Žižek, too, stresses the importance of this double "indivisible remainder" in Schelling whereby "this Subject ... posits itself as grounded in and simultaneously different from its contracted Substance: a free Subject has to have a Ground which is not himself." *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, 35.

problem of reifying the infinite activity of the self and thereby limiting what is by its very nature, if not its very definition, in-finite, or ab-solute. 'All cows,' to paraphrase Hegel's famous rebuke, may be 'black at night,' but they are clear in the light of day. It is important to keep in mind (particularly for our argument concerning the relation of art to this absolute freedom) that whereas human thought is always grounded this ground is never itself grounded. One should not underestimate the importance of this paradox in which the human exists outside itself at the same time as it exists for itself: "The question is: how can this condition be thought?" (36), or, again: "The question is: how can one think this" (37), and: "The question is: how such a thing can be conceived of" (38)?

The Fichtean self is thus (incorrectly) defined by Schelling as a positing which thereby abolishes the absolute which is itself: "For the self to bring about its own limitation is equivalent to saying that it abolishes itself as absolute activity" (38). But Schelling's goal here is not to abolish the absolute, which is only possible by abolishing *and* not abolishing the boundary of its own self-assertion: "Thus the boundary is to be abolished and at the same time not abolished" (39). This can only be accomplished by a sort of "truce" (my term) in which a temporary reprieve allows one to assert a boundary to the absolute that is ultimately no boundary at all: "The boundary is abolished for every specific point, yet it is not abolished absolutely, but merely thrust out into infinity" (39). Put differently: the boundary of the absolute is to be sought in the very denial of boundaries which is its own boundary.

Those who come to philosophy from literary studies will quickly recognize such a boundary-which-is-no-boundary as that of *figuration*, the "principle" (as it were, since the principle of figuration is a figuration of principle that can never be stated as such) of all aesthetic discourse. The more properly philosophical terms that Schelling uses to describe this are those of the *real* and *ideal*: "But now the boundary must be at once real and ideal. Real, that is, independent of the self, since otherwise the latter is not genuinely bounded; ideal, dependent on the self, since otherwise the self does not posit or intuit itself as limited" (40). Since there must be a *positing* for the self to appear at all, this positing must be understood aesthetically as an ideal *posing*. But, since this aesthetic "posing" is not seen as such, but only as that which is philosophically "posited," it has the structure of a chiasmus in which:

Both activities, the real and the ideal, mutually presuppose each other.

The real, originally striving into infinity, but to be limited for the sake of

self-consciousness, is nothing without the ideal, for which, in its limitation, it is infinite. Conversely, the ideal activity is nothing without the to-be-intuited, the limitable, and on that very account, the real. (40–1)

“On that very account, the real.” That which “on that very account” is not real but ideal is real but not ideal. What needs to be stressed here as essential to our goal of understanding the aesthetic absolute is the notion of a real-ideal that is non-existent as such. An “intellectual intuition” (*intellektuelle Anschauung*) in other words, that has the structure of a hallucination insofar as it is seen and believed in but not really there because separate from reality as such (*Wir erwachen aus der intellektuellen Anschauung wie aus dem Zustande des Todes*¹³). The remarkable thing in Schelling’s notion of “intellectual intuition” (which Kant defined as an intuition of the “thing-in-itself”¹⁴) is that it is the unreal absolute reality which is real, just as “sensible intuition” is the “real reality” which is, ultimately, unreal. As opposed to hallucinations, however, the artwork-as-absolute is closer to the absolute reality—truth—of things insofar as it unites with reality the subjective freedom that Schelling has deduced as the transcendental basis of all thought: “in the self as such there is initial union and combination of what we must hereafter separate” (41). In other words, through its link with the absolute the artwork returns the truth to things precisely because they are not true. As Robert Wicks has written with regard to the notion of “intellectual intuition” as derived from Kant:

In sum, intellectual intuition is self-sufficient creativity; artistic genius is a creative capacity restricted by natural materials. Although the genius can only project a new form upon the given manifold by means of its productive imagination, it is here, in the creation of novel and highly meaningful forms expressive of rational human nature [such as metaphor!] that we encounter the godlike aspect of creative genius. In the creative activity of both the artistic genius and the intuitive intellect, there is an exercise of the freedom whose source Kant situates within the supersensible realm.

Kant’s implicit affiliation of intellectual intuition, artistic genius and freedom foreshadows Schelling’s metaphysical interpretation of artistic genius, for Schelling regards the genius’s capacity for intellectual intuition as an activity so

¹³ *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus*, 124.

¹⁴ “But then it is at least possible to regard the material world as a mere phenomenon, and to think something which is not a phenomenon, namely a thing-in-itself, as its substrate. And this we may rest upon a corresponding intellectual intuition, *albeit it is not the intuition we possess*.” *The Critique of Judgment*, 66 (emphasis mine).

primal, that it is capable of resolving the conflict that preoccupied Kant for most of his mature philosophical life ...¹⁵

I would simply add to Wicks' excellent description that Schelling also describes intellectual intuition as the *Exstase* (*extasis*) which occurs in a state of union between the subject and object that is essential to art and creativity.¹⁶

Although it should be clear that the absolute we are discussing, here, in Schelling, and throughout this work, has nothing whatsoever to do with a reified absolute or real "*Ding-an-sich*" (sc. an actual absolute of which we can have no knowledge and of which any knowledge would preclude its very possibility), Schelling makes it clear in the following section of the *System* exactly what the term does mean in its non-reified sense. There must be, according to Schelling (Pt. III, I, "Deduction of the absolute Synthesis Contained in the Act of Self-Consciousness," 42–7), an "absolute synthesis" which precedes the breaking up into such oppositional elements as subject/object, real/ideal, etc.¹⁷ Put simply, for the self to exist it must be objectified, but for the self to exist as object it must also exist separately from such objectification:

Through this act ("an absolute act") there is now, *for us* who philosophize, something posited in the self *qua* object, but hence not yet posited therein *qua* subject (for the *self as such*, what is posited as real is in one and the same act also posited as ideal); our enquiry will therefore have to go on until what is posited for us in the self *qua* object is also posited for us in the self *qua* subject, that is, until for us the consciousness of our object coincides with our own consciousness, and thus until the self itself has for us arrived at the point from which we started. (42, emphasis Schelling's)

This "absolute act," again, is not the absurdity of a real "absolute absolute," but is purely a condition of our own "self-consciousness" ("Such an act is to be found only in self-consciousness," 43).¹⁸ Such an "absolute synthesis" is exactly

¹⁵ Robert Wicks, *Hegel's Theory of Aesthetic Judgment*, 32.

¹⁶ *Initia Philosophia Universae*, 39.

¹⁷ This is merely the first of many statements here which anticipate Hegel's dialectic. Cf. "What is original is the conflict of opposing directions in the self; the identity is the resultant of this. Originally, indeed, we are conscious only of identity, but enquiry into the conditions of self-consciousness has served to show that such identity can only be a mediated, synthetic one," 45.

¹⁸ None of the German Idealists trafficked in this absurdity. Note, for example, this simple statement at the beginning of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* (1804): "But surely everyone who is willing to reflect can perceive that absolutely all being posits a thinking or consciousness of itself ... Thus, absolute oneness can no more reside in being than in its correlative consciousness; it can as little be posited in the thing as in the representation of the thing":

This is Kant's discovery ... Like Kantian philosophy, the science of knowing is transcendental

what Schelling described earlier as the conjunction of the real and the ideal (in which what is real is ideally so and vice versa), and of the finite, objective bounded determined and the infinite, subjective unbounded indeterminate. The “dogmatist” tries to explain the latter by beginning with the former, but this, according to Schelling, “is unthinkable, for self-consciousness is an act, and the boundary, to be a boundary of the self, must be simultaneously dependent on, and independent of, the self” (43). That is, what is bounded—sc. what is contingent—must be preceded by what is unbounded—sc. what is absolute. Again, this absolute is the primordial condition of our human experience, not some kind of “absolute absolute”:

This action is self-consciousness. Beyond self-consciousness the self is pure objectivity. This pure objective (nonobjective originally, precisely because an objective with a subjective is impossible) *is the one and only in-itself there is.* (43, emphasis mine)

There are, then, three things at work here: the absolute synthesis which knows but can never itself be known (“The limiting activity does not come to consciousness, or become an object, and is therefore the activity of the pure subject” 44); the limited, objective reality which is known (“The limited activity is merely that which becomes an object, the purely objective element in self-consciousness” 44); and “the self.” It is this third activity, oscillating between the limited and the limiting, whereby the self is first engendered; and, since the producing and the being of the self are one, it is “nothing other than the self of *self-consciousness itself*” (44, emphasis in the original).

A strange thing, this “third thing,” for it is both separate from *and* “nothing other than the self of self-consciousness itself.” Strange also, because the opposition is thus itself opposed by the reality that what is opposed is not really opposed at all—namely, a self which is separate from the absolute self but also the same as the absolute self insofar as it can be known. Schelling refers to these centrifugal/centripetal tendencies in gravitational terms:

This conflict is a conflict of activities originally opposed, not so much in subject [indeed!] *as in direction*, for both are activities of one and the same self. The origin of these two directions is this.—The self has an urge to produce

philosophy, and thus it resembles Kant’s philosophy in that it does not posit the absolute in the thing, as previously, or in subjective knowing, which is simply impossible, because whomever [*sic*] reflects on this second term already has the first, but in the *oneness* of both. (*The Science of Knowing*, 25.)

the infinite, and this tendency must be thought of as directed outwards (as centrifugal), but it is not distinguishable as such without an activity regressively directed inwards to the self as center. The outgoing, by nature infinite activity is the objective in the self; the self-reverting activity is nothing else but the striving to intuit oneself in that infinitude ... within that self-consciousness *a clash of opposing directions* is necessary. (44–5, italics in the original, emphasis mine)

In describing this conflict of “directionality” Schelling, unlike Hegel, has reduced what might seem to be a purely dialectical, ideal relationship to one that is far more “physical” or “molecular” in which our infinite, uncontained subjectivity cannot help but move outside itself while, at the same time, returning to itself “centripetally” as the very, selfsame centrifugal self. And yet, Schelling then asks, what is one to make of an absolute which is absolutely separated from itself as the very condition of its own separation from itself? If the goal of all striving is unity (“since the self is nothing but the striving to be self-identical,” 45), is one not, then, relegated to what David Krell would call the tragedy of the absolute,¹⁹ i.e. the necessary loss of the very thing that it is impossible to avoid striving for? Schelling’s answer is the positing of a permanent instability in which a sort of identity is achieved in which the desire for the absolute, and its necessary loss, is constantly reaffirmed (the difference between this and the Hegelian solution is that Schelling privileges the contradiction as more original than “the identity that is the resultant of this”):

The original contradiction in the self’s own nature can neither be abolished, without abolition of the self itself, nor can it endure in and for itself. It will persist only through the necessity of doing so, that is, through the striving that results therefrom, to maintain it, and thereby bring identity into it. (45)

And yet, just as tragedy properly understood (by Schelling, Hölderlin, Goethe, Hegel, Nietzsche et al.), involves a *positive* loss of meaning in which what is lost is actually the affirmation of something greater (the absolute), an “absolute synthesis” (46) is posited in which the absolute becomes real precisely by being canceled out as absolute by a reality which is itself canceled out as absolute. It is, therefore, the very conflict between subject and object, real and ideal, contingent and absolute, etc., that creates a solution for the conflict in the very conflict: namely, the positing of *one act* that unifies the subject with the object

¹⁹ *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God.*

by cancelling both out and thereby producing the greater, infinite absolute that is the unity of the contingent with the absolute:

The subject asserts itself only in opposition to the object, and the object only in opposition to the subject; neither, that is, can become real without destroying the other, but the point of destruction of one by the other can never be reached, precisely because each is what it is only in opposition to the other. Both have therefore to be united, for neither can destroy the other, and yet nor can they subsist together. The conflict, therefore, is not so much a conflict between the two factors, as between the inability, on the one hand, to unite the infinite opposites, and the necessity of doing so, on the other, if the identity of self-consciousness is not to be blotted out. This very fact, that subject and object are *absolute* opposites, puts the self under the necessity of condensing an infinity of actions into a single absolute one. (46)

“If the opposition were not absolute,” Schelling concludes, “the unifying activity would not be absolute, would not be a necessary and involuntary one.” That is to say, *the necessary division within human consciousness produces the absolute by virtue of the very separation from the absolute*. Despite the fact that Schelling does not here relate this notion to art, nor to the notion of tragedy, this should not prevent us from making this connection given Schelling’s earlier remarks about art as “the universal organon of philosophy.” For it is in the work of art that freedom (or the absolute) is made real through a unity of the subject with the object that is both the cancellation and the affirmation of either, and, in particular, in the tragic work of art in which the individual asserts him- or herself through his or her destruction.

Although Schelling does not make the connections in these intervening sections of the *System* to the work of art, we can understand what he is describing as “productive intuition” (“First Epoch: From Original Sensation to Productive Intuition,” 51–93) in aesthetic terms:

The self contains an illimitable activity, but it is not in the self as such, unless posited by the latter as its own activity. However, the self cannot intuit it as its own activity without distinguishing itself therefrom as the subject or substrate of the infinite activity in question. But by this very act there arises a new duality, a contradiction between finitude and infinitude. The self *qua* subject of this infinite activity is dynamically (*potentia*) infinite, but the *activity itself*, in being posited as an activity of the self, becomes finite; but in becoming finite, it once more becomes extended out over the boundary, yet in being extended it is also again limited.—And thus this alteration is prolonged *ad infinitum*.

The self that is elevated in this manner to an intelligence is therefore thrown into a perpetual state of expansion and contraction; but this state is precisely that of imaging and producing. The activity at work in this alternation is therefore bound to appear as a producing activity. (76)

Again we find the essential, foundational opposition between the expansive, infinite (“centrifugal”) self and its “centripetal” delineation into recognizable form or matter, but here Schelling uses this notion to explain “productive intuition” as the production of an object by a subject (including, again, the object of the subject itself) that is both the subject’s reality as well as its denial (or, one might thus say, falsification). In thus explaining how the truth of intuition rests not in its object (sensory or otherwise) but rather in the production of an object that is the non-truth of a truth that necessarily recedes from this objectification, Schelling has paved the way for his later, climactic assertion at the end of the *System* (and in the *Philosophy of Art*) that such a process is precisely what puts the work of art in closer contact with the philosophical absolute.

In the “Second Epoch” Schelling moves from a simple notion of cause and effect whereby one thing is merely the cause of something else (“finite intelligence”) to notions of “reciprocity” and “co-existence” in which the “free act of the intelligence” is closer to the aesthetic, absolute truth (“absolute intelligence”). “Reciprocity” (*Wechselwirkung*) is Schelling’s notion that A is caused by B any which time B is caused by A; for example (mine), the parent is the cause of the child but the child is also the cause of the parent, not just because the parent was also a child but also because the entire relationship is, at a higher (or pre-existent) level, one of simultaneity and not of succession. “Co-existence” (*Koexistenz*) is the necessary pre-condition of separate existences in that, like reciprocity with regard to causality, things must first exist together in order for them to then be thought to exist apart; for example, “substance” gives rise to “accidents” which are by definition conjoined in the same substance. Similarly, *space* is not an empty category of thought but rather the necessary co-existence of everything that exists (“In general it is first through the category of reciprocity that space becomes the form of coexistence; under the category of substance it emerges only as the form of extensity,” 111). Although space is thereby distinguished from time, in which latter the separate existences of things are established, the latter only exist because of their necessary coexistence, just as time cannot, obviously, exist without space. Space thus precedes time and stands in relation to it as the absolute stands in relation to the contingent:

Time alone has a fundamental direction, though the point which gives it direction lies in the infinite; but precisely because it has this basic direction, only one direction is in fact distinguished therein. Space originally has no direction, for in it all directions mutually cancel one another; as the ideal substrate of all succession it is itself absolute rest, absolute want of intensity, and to that extent nothing. –What has hitherto made philosophers doubtful in regard to space is simply that it possesses all the predicates of nothing, and yet cannot be regarded as nothing. Precisely because space originally has no direction, every direction is contained in it, when once direction has entered into it at all. (111)

Everything rests on the unending, unendable “conflict” [*Streit*] between an absolute out of which the contingent emerges and the contingent which is thus absolute and so must seek to return to itself as such: “But now the self originally is a pure and absolute identity, to which it must constantly seek to return; yet the return to this identity is yoked to the original duality, as to a condition never wholly overcome ... So if there is a continual producing in the self, this is possible only in that the condition of all producing, that original conflict of opposing activities in the self, is reestablished *ad infinitum*” (113). The importance of Schelling’s notion of “indifference,” with which this statement about identity is synonymous, is well known,²⁰ but its relation to aesthetics and, indeed, important aesthetic ideas such as Kant’s earlier notion of “disinterestedness” and Derrida’s later notion of “*différance*” has largely passed unnoticed.²¹ Any mediation between the finite and infinite is thus as impossible as it is necessary; that is, the closest one comes to representing the absolute is also the farthest from the absolute even as it is the closest: “The intelligence can never extend itself into the infinite, for it is prevented from doing so by its striving to return back into itself. It is, however, equally incapable of an absolute return into itself, for from this it is prevented by the tendency to infinitude. Here, therefore, no mediation is possible, and every synthesis is but a relative one” (113–14).

²⁰ “Indifference is the principle of philosophy,” (quoted by Michael Vater in *Bruno*, 18).

²¹ Andrew Bowie notes with regard to Derrida’s “*différance*”: “This ‘same’ *différance* plays the same role as the absolute in Schelling.” And yet, strangely, in his lengthy discussion of Derrida and Schelling Bowie does not relate Derrida’s particular notion to Schelling’s capital notion of “indifference.”) Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 69. An even better example of the relation of Derrida to these neglected Idealists is Fichte’s notion of the *hiatus irrationalis*, or “irrational gap,” which accompanies all discourse as its link to the absolute (*The Science of Knowing*, 120, 124, 158). Although Michael Vater ignores the important link between Schelling’s capital notion of “indifference” and an aesthetic realm with which it is largely synonymous (e.g. the notion of unified contraries which can never be known as such), he is very perceptive when it comes to describing Schelling’s notion: “It is his [Schelling’s] genius (although some may think it a perverse sort of genius) to have hit upon an a priori logical idea which is *nowhere* exhibited in experience, namely indifference or the identity of opposites” (*Bruno*, 73, emphasis in the original).

The ultimate resolution of this problem of the necessity and impossibility of an ultimate resolution is contained in Schelling's reference, following this discussion of simultaneity and co-existence and concluding the "Second Epoch," to the *universe* (*Unversum*) as the actual existence of that in which we all exist in a necessary relation to that which is beyond ourselves:

we shall be persuaded that this subordination is none other than the subordination of celestial objects one to another, *as it occurs in the universe*; a subordination such that the organization of these bodies into *Systems*, where one is conserved in its being by the next, is nothing else but an organization of the intelligence itself, *which throughout all these products is continually in search of the absolute point of equilibrium with itself, albeit that this point lies at infinity.* (114, emphasis mine).

With regard to the status of this very different sort of "universal" (i.e. our position in the universe), it is as real as the existence of the universe, and known through our aesthetic consciousness and works of art (as Schelling will make explicit in the final section of the *System*) which consistently deny as well as affirm their relation to the merely empirical. (This is why it is grossly misleading to describe Idealisms such as Schelling's as opposed to the empirical.) It is here that Schelling implicitly refers to the Kantian/Schillerian reference to "the veil of Isis": "If one seeks to determine, through time as such, the absolute intelligence, which has absolute rather than empirical eternity, *then it is everything that is, and was, and will be.* But the *empirical* intelligence, in order to be something, that is, to be a determinate, must cease to be everything and cease to be outside time" (119; italics Schelling's, underlining mine). Before turning to the final pages of the *System* devoted to making explicit the connection between art and its underlying absolute, we will consider Schelling's discussion of "History as a ... progressive, gradual self-disclosing revelation of the absolute" (211) and, then, the related discussion of teleology which—not insignificantly—directly precedes the final discussion of art.

Throughout Schelling's treatise there is the abiding sense of an absolute that underlies the appearance of anything, be it subjective freedom or objective, determined lawfulness. This can never be known as such nor appear as such without contradicting its very essence as the underlying ground or truth of everything—even or especially if it is the ground or absolute itself to which we are referring.

Now if this higher thing [sc. "the common source of the intelligent and the free"] be nothing else but the ground of identity between the absolutely subjective

and the absolutely objective, the conscious and the unconscious, which part company precisely in order to appear in the free act, then this higher thing itself can be neither subject nor object, nor both at once, but only the absolute identity, in which is no duality at all, and which, precisely because duality is the condition of all consciousness, can never attain thereto. This eternal unknown, which, like the everlasting sun in the realm of spirits, conceals itself behind its own unclouded light, and though never becoming an object, impresses its identity upon all free actions, is simultaneously the same for all intelligences, the invisible root of which all intelligences are but powers, and the eternal mediator between the self-determining subjective within us, and the objective or intuitant; at once the ground of lawfulness in freedom, and of freedom in the lawfulness of the object. (208–9)

In order for there to be the appearance of freedom, of that part of the duality which is set against the objectively real of nature, there must be, according to Schelling, a “third, higher thing” which underlies both sides of this dichotomy and so is as free as it is determined and as determined as it is free. Schelling refers to this “absolute identity” as “like the everlasting sun in the realm of spirits [which] conceals itself behind its own unclouded light and ... impresses its identity upon all free actions.” Freedom is thus, according to Schelling, likened to the “light of light,” i.e. the source of light before it causes anything to appear, or to be lit. This “everlasting sun” is thus not to be confused with the actual sun, but is rather to be understood as the catachrestic figuration of a truth that can never be known otherwise—that is to say, as the real trope of “absolute identity” which underlies the appearance of everything as well as the freedom of everything to appear or not, as the case may be—“at once the ground of lawfulness in freedom, and of freedom in the lawfulness of the object.” Like Kant, Schelling shies away from thinking that this moment of figurative truth can ever be known as such—as Schelling notes a few pages later, when that happens, “when this period will begin, we are unable to tell. But whenever it comes into existence, God also will then *exist*” (212, emphasis in the original).

Schelling’s absolute does not, then, retreat from the world of appearances—both subjective and objective—that it causes to appear, but, rather, is to be looked for in “traces [*die Spur*, Schelling uses the singular here] of this eternal and unalterable identity in the lawfulness which runs, like the weaving of an unknown hand, through the free play of choice in history” (209). At once similar to but at the same time radically different from Hegel, the contingencies of history, just like the apparently arbitrary actions of individuals, are in reality

traces of an absolute that determines the very freedom that appears to be freed from any determination. If, Schelling notes in this regard, the absolute were to appear as itself, as opposed to appearing everywhere, it would then be stripped of the freedom which is as much a characteristic of the absolute as is its absolute, objective immanence. In other words, it is necessary in Schelling's *System* that history and individual actions appear to be arbitrary and contingent in order for the absolute to assert itself in its freedom from every objective determination. And, while this certainly sounds like the dreaded (for the later Schelling) Hegelian dialectic, the difference is that this freedom from objective determination is fully determined in the work of art that denies mere knowledge, rather than in a knowledge that would deny the work of art.

It is as if, Schelling explains by way of another figure, we are the *disjecta membra poetae*, the fragments of a poet's play in which we carry on as if we are free and as if there is no higher purpose, but only mere contingency. Indeed we must carry on as if we were free in order for the play or "system" to work as the product of an absolute synthesis or identity that makes just this freedom necessary. "The absolute acts through each single intelligence, whose action is thus *itself* absolute, and to that extent neither free nor unfree, but both at once, *absolutely* free, and for that reason also necessary" (210). Or, put the other way, it is as if we think of ourselves objectively as separate entities, and of the world objectively as having its own objective reality, in order that the absolute identity of both should be able to be rendered objectively. Oddly, our individual freedom is thus the real appearance of an absolute that is absolutely unfree.

The "only truth of history," then, is of a "progressive, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the absolute" (211). It is not (*pace* Hegel!) that the absolute exists in history ("For God never exists, if the existent is that which presents itself in the objective world"), but, rather, that history exists in the absolute ... "Everything depends upon these alternatives being understood" (211). There are, according to Schelling, three distinct historical periods in which this relationship to the absolute is defined in three distinctly different ways. The first is the "tragic period", in which the absolute asserts itself as such and thereby obliterates any human claim to autonomous meaning. The second, "natural" period is one in which, rather than being opposed to contingency and obliterating it in the name of a higher destiny, the absolute informs this contingency as its very nature. That is, everything *is* the absolute insofar as it is part of a wholly natural plan: "All events which fall within this period are thus to be regarded also as mere natural consequences, so that even the fall of the Roman Empire has neither a tragic

nor a moral aspect, being a necessary outcome of nature's laws, and indeed a mere tribute that was paid over to nature" (212). The problem with this "natural" solution is made apparent when Schelling describes the third, coming, stage as one in which the absolute is no longer rendered as immanent or subjective compared to the first stage, which was transcendent and objective. For then, Schelling states, "God will also then exist", as opposed to being either totally separate from us or (which, it turns out, is the same thing), totally separate from itself in its identification with the natural. With this reference to the real existence of God we turn to Schelling's discussion of teleology as it relates (as in Kant) to art as, itself, the real existence of the absolute.

As we argued in the chapter on Kant's *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, any discussion of art's relation to the absolute involves a certain positioning with regard to teleology, and this nexus is demonstrated in Schelling's *System* by his movement from the preceding discussion of history (207–12) to teleology (212–18) and, then, to the climactic discussion of the work of art (218 to end, 236). Schelling begins this section on teleology by noting how our subjective autonomy—freedom—is as imaginary as it is real, for what may be construed as stemming from ourselves individually or collectively must also be construed as obeying a higher system of constraints: "every action, alike of the individual and of the entire species, must be conceived of, *qua* action, as free, but *qua* objective consequence, as standing under natural laws. Subjectively, therefore, for inner appearance, we act, but objectively we never act; it is rather that another acts through us, as it were" (212–13). The result is a chiasmatic reversal in which I am the other which is me: "the unconscious in my act must be identical with the conscious" (213), although this unconscious is erased every time "I" act and dupe myself into believing I am free ("This identity [sc. between subject and object as just described] cannot be evidenced in free action itself, since precisely for the sake of free action it abolishes itself," 213). This separation of myself by myself from myself—sc. of myself from its original identity with the world which is its reality, can never be overcome insofar as the very terms of such an overcoming are determined by this very separation: "the latter [objectification of ourselves] only comes about through an abolition of such identity, *and through a separation that never terminates*" (213, emphasis mine). Put differently, this original identity being the ground of history—understood both individually and communally—"it cannot, conversely, be demonstrated from history."

This original identity of our subjective freedom with our objective determination leads to teleology as the questioning of the ultimate significance of our

merely subjective (or for that matter merely objective) essences—the history of our history, as it were. One might be tempted to consider such an original unity out of which any merely subjective or objective determination could only later emerge as “blind necessity”, insofar as we are being asked to consider not what we think of as the original identity but, rather, as that which precedes our thinking of such an original identity. But such an attribution of “blindness” is itself blind, insofar as “how such a [blind] mechanism could be possible in a nature whose basic feature is consciousness would be hard to understand” (213), although this by no means leads us back to an application of human reasoning to first principles (an absurdity already dismissed by Kant) since “it would be equally hard to understand how a realization of our purposes in the external world could ever be possible through conscious and free activity,” (214). Schelling’s solution to this impasse reminds us of a phrase used by Kant in describing the “Third Moment” of the “Analytic of the Beautiful”:

But now if all conscious activity is purposive, this coincidence of conscious and unconscious activity [Schelling’s terms for the primary and secondary—absolute and contingent—realities] can evidence itself *only in a product that is purposive, without being purposively brought about*. Nature must be a product of this sort, and this, indeed, is the principle of all teleology, in which alone we may seek for the solution of the problem posed above [sc. added by Schelling later: how or by what means this absolute harmony of necessity and freedom, postulated for the sake of making action possible, can again itself become objective to us]. (214, emphasis in the original)

The absolute is thus neither freedom nor necessity but predetermines the existence of both, leading to our own sense of freedom which is thus to be properly understood in its relation to the absolute as a freedom without freedom or, as just stated, a purpose without purpose:

As surely as the appearance of freedom is to be comprehended only through a single identical activity, which has divided itself, purely for the sake of appearing, into conscious and unconscious forms [through a single absolute harmony, which has divided itself, for the sake of appearing, into conscious and unconscious activity], so surely must nature, as that [which lies beyond this separation and] is brought forth without freedom, appear as a product that is purposive without being brought forth in accordance with a purpose; as a product, that is, which although it is the work of unseeing mechanism, yet looks as though it were consciously brought about. (215)

Our relation to the absolute, to teleology, is thus based on a necessary “as if” that assigns a purpose or “end” to what can have neither. Yet this “as if” thinking is not deemed by Schelling (nor, as we saw earlier, by Kant) as weak thinking—quite the contrary. To assign a purpose to what is essentially purposeless is only weak thinking when viewed from the standpoint of objective thought, which can never apprehend such a purpose anyway. Absolute, teleological thinking is even more rigorous than such objective thought insofar as it includes within itself the freedom from objective determination that is necessary in order to consider a final purpose that can never be apprehended otherwise. Nature, which is synonymous in Schelling with the teleological absolute, is thus to be understood as the source of human freedom insofar as it is essentially free from any purpose, including being free from any purpose. Moreover, it is only through figurative language that one can understand such an essentially contradictory “as if” essence: “Nature in its purposive forms speaks figuratively to us, says Kant; the interpretation of its cipher yields us the appearance of freedom in ourselves” (215–16). As opposed to the mechanistic understanding of nature, understanding of its teleological purpose can only be expressed through figurative language which is freed from any literal, objective determination.

“Man is forever a broken fragment,” Schelling adds, because forced to endlessly attach a literal significance to his understanding of the whole that can only be expressed or understood figuratively, as through such a true figure as that of a “broken fragment.” Or, put differently, man is a broken fragment because its freedom is always being denied by its very assertion as such. The implications—both positive and negative—of this statement, while they are to a large extent already understood by Schelling, are to be drawn out more fully by Nietzsche and Heidegger in their own negative re-evaluations of the “human” and “humanism” and, more positively, in their re-evaluations of an aesthetic essence that would turn such a broken fragment into an essential human artifact, or work of art.

The difference between nature and the work of art with regard to their underlying teleological purpose is that nature is essentially absolute in its necessary conjunction of freedom and necessity, while the artifact, in presenting us with the figurative representation of this unity, denies the very unity it represents: “For the difference between artifact and natural product resides precisely in this, that in the former the concept is impressed only upon the surface of the object, while in the latter it has gone over into the object itself and is utterly inseparable therefrom” (216–17). In other words, the artifact can never be

the thing (-in-itself) as it already exists in nature, but is a representation of that “concept.” And yet, as should be obvious by now and as Schelling is quick to point out, this difference is not really to the detriment of the secondary, artistic production of the artifact, insofar as the attribution of a teleological purpose even to nature itself is also only a concept that is “impressed only upon the surface of the object”: “But now this absolute identity of the purposive concept with the object itself is attributable only to a type of production in which conscious and unconscious activity are united; but this is possible only within an intelligence” (217). While nature has already achieved, fully and completely, what the artifact strives to represent, namely, the absolute: “for all that it [nature] does not present this identity to me as one whose ultimate ground resides in the self itself” (217, underlining in the original). What might seem to be the superiority of nature *vis-à-vis* the artifact with regard to their representations of the absolute is thus reversed insofar as the “transcendental philosopher” is primarily interested in the absolute as a human concept of the absolute rather than as the absolute “thing-in-itself.”²² “Now the aim of our whole science was in fact precisely this, of explaining how the ultimate ground of the harmony between subjective and objective becomes an object to the self itself” (217, emphasis Schelling’s). The natural absolute is thus of less interest to the “transcendental philosopher” than the absolute within the self, that is, the absolute of the self itself “whereby in one and the same appearance the self is at once conscious and unconscious for itself” (218, emphasis in the original). The natural absolute cannot provide this, insofar as it is separate from the self in its very link to an absolute outside ourselves, whereas the artifact or artwork represents the absolute of the self itself:

that in one and the same intuition the self becomes simultaneously conscious *for itself* and unconscious, the intuition here postulated is distinguished from that which we have in the case of natural products, where we certainly recognize this identity, but not as an identity whose principle lies in the self itself. Every organism is a monogram of that original identity, but in order to recognize itself in that reflected image, the self must already have recognized itself directly in the identity in question.

²² Frederick Beiser, it should be noted, argues against the view proffered here (and elsewhere, by Manfred Frank) in insisting that the romantics’ “metaphysical view of art” is derived from their *Naturphilosophie*, rather than the converse or, which is truer in the case of Schelling when taking his earlier and later works together, that the two metaphysics are actually one. See *The Romantic Imperative*, 86–7.

We have only to analyze the features of this intuition we have now deduced, in order to discover the intuition itself; and, to judge beforehand, it can be no other than *the intuition of art*. (218, emphasis in the original)

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In focusing on the final sections of the treatise where, in marked contrast to Hegel, Schelling declares art as the highest goal of all transcendental consciousness, or Spirit, we will begin with the penultimate paragraph of the *System* in which Schelling concludes his summary of the entire work:

But now if this consciously free activity, which in acting is opposed to the objective, although required to be one with it, is intuited in its original identity with the objective—a thing utterly impossible through freedom—we finally obtain by this the highest power of self-intuition; and this, since it already lies out beyond the conditions of consciousness, and is indeed itself the consciousness that creates itself *ab initio*, must appear, where it exists, as absolutely contingent; and this absolute contingency in the highest power of self-intuition is what we designate by means of the idea of genius. (222)

“Genius,” which Schelling declared a few pages earlier “is only possible in the arts” (222), produces an artwork that is not an object but, rather, a product of the “consciously free activity which is opposed to the objective.” This critical definition of the work of art unites the subject with the object, and is thereby understandable in terms of neither. It is for this reason that Schelling considers art superior to both philosophy (the subject) and science (the object), for the former thinks this absolute without being able to express it objectively, while the latter understands the world objectively without thinking about its ideal, transcendental (or teleological) reality. Art is philosophical but also superior to philosophy because it is through art that “we finally obtain the highest power of self-intuition,” that is, art realizes itself, and we realize ourselves, absolutely as opposed to being either the subject of its creations or the creation of a subject. (Schelling adduces his notion of “mythology” in this final section as a way of our returning to this process of self-creation.)

This higher state of “intellectual intuition” out of which “consciousness” emerges and thus continually “creates itself *ab initio*” “must appear, where it exists, as absolutely contingent; and this absolute contingency in the highest power of self-intuition is what we designate by means of the idea of *genius*” (emphasis Schelling’s). The absolute, it appears, is not so absolute after all, but,

rather, “absolute contingency,” an oxymoron that should only trouble us if we fail to realize that it has been the point of Schelling’s entire treatise to grasp that which, by virtue of its status underlying everything, must also elude any attempt at understanding.

Beyond this notion of the genius required for the production of works of art, we will now conclude this chapter by considering a number of other, more explicit, points made in this final section of the *System* concerning art as the absolute (219–36).

First: Objects in nature and objects in art both exist in relation to the teleological absolute but contrariwise. That is, with regard to the former, natural objects begin (and so to some extent remain) in the absolute, insofar as their origin and essence as organic or as things are unknown to us (Schelling’s “unconscious” [*das Bewusstlose*]), whereas art objects begin in consciousness as projected projects of human activity that are known as such and only end with a return to the same absolute in which nature began:

To put it more briefly: nature begins as unconscious and ends as conscious; the process of production is not purposive but the product certainly is so. In the activity at present under discussion [sc. art], the self must begin (subjectively) with consciousness, and end without consciousness, or *objectively*; the self is conscious in respect of production, unconscious in regard to the product. (219, emphasis in the original)

Despite their similarity, the teleological essence of art, as opposed to that of nature, poses a particular problem for Schelling (although one he will be quick to resolve), namely, “How are we to explain transcendently to ourselves an intuition such as this, in which the unconscious activity operates as it were through the conscious to the point of attaining complete identity therewith?” (219). In other words, how is it possible for the artwork to return to the absolute given its origin in consciousness? Schelling answers this by comparing this paradox to the one frequently invoked in the *System* with regard to freedom: since freedom must be essentially free from itself it can only be known through what it is not: “On this point we may appeal directly to the arguments already brought forward in regard to free action, namely that the objective factor therein is supplied by something independent of freedom” (220). As Kant had earlier maintained, the artwork must be essentially freed from any and all objective determinations. The artwork is thus free and necessary just as it is (correlatively) conscious and unconscious, because only then can the artistic

object go beyond itself and in going beyond itself assert itself as that which goes beyond itself—as absolute.

Moreover, the artistic absolute is here deemed by Schelling superior to the “natural absolute”, in that this synthesis of freedom with necessity, and consciousness with the unconscious, sustains these contradictions within the artwork “for the self itself”, as opposed to nature, where the link to the absolute is not reconciled within us nor within nature:

The intelligence will therefore end with a complete recognition of the identity expressed in the product as an identity whose principle lies in the intelligence itself; it will end, that is, in a complete intuiting of itself. Now since it was the free tendency to self-intuition in that identity which originally divided the intelligence from itself, the feeling accompanying this intuition will be that of an infinite tranquility. With the completion of the product, all urge to produce is halted, all contradictions are eliminated, all riddles resolved. (221)

As Kant insisted, and as Magritte, with his famous painting of a pipe which is not a pipe demonstrated, the aesthetic “object” that is no object at all is, after all, an object of sorts, and it is this paradoxical status which accounts for the unique value Schelling is ascribing to it here. That is, the absolute artwork does not tell us who or what we are, for the simple reason that it precedes any such cognitive formulation. Rather, the artwork “resolves the riddle” of who or what we are by standing outside any such cognitive formulation in producing an object that is the subject producing the object and so not really any object at all but, rather, the true subject, objectified as only it can be, subjectively.

The classic example of such riddle solving is Oedipus’s famous confrontation with the sphinx, but the “cognitive formulation” that Oedipus provides is not the absolute resolution that Schelling is referring to here. Rather, it is in the myth itself, and the mythic figure of the sphinx (vs. the real, “human” figure of Oedipus) who defeats as well as being defeated by Oedipus, that the real resolution of the enigma and the absolute truth of the myth resides. Such absolute knowledge is by definition “infinitely tranquil” because, like all works of art, it produces an objective formulation of the subject that precedes any objective formulation in being truly subjective. Or, to conclude with Schelling’s own statement: “This unknown, however, whereby the objective and the conscious activities are here brought into unexpected harmony, is none other than that absolute which contains the common ground of the pre-established harmony between the conscious and the unconscious” (221).

Second: Our relation to this “aesthetic absolute” involves a relation to something that is not something one can relate to, involving, as it does, an identity with subject and object that is lost as soon as it is recognized as such. Schelling is quick to relate this anomaly to genius, significantly expanding on Kant’s discussion of same in his “Analytic of the Sublime” (#49):

That incomprehensible agency which supplies objectivity to the conscious, without the cooperation of freedom, and to some extent in opposition to freedom (wherein is eternally dispersed what in this production is united), is denominated by means of the obscure concept of genius.

The product we postulate is none other than the product of genius, or, since genius is possible only in the arts, the product of art. (222)

The objectivity in question is, in Schelling’s terminology, “unconscious” insofar as it is separate from what is known. Unlike objective cognition, which naively assumes the reality of the object to correspond to what is known about it, the aesthetic object actually unifies both subject and object in the artwork and is thereby actually superior to the former, although it seems inferior with respect to the objectivity that it is lacking. The aesthetic, absolute object is both subject and object, subjective and objective, and thereby neither—it is, again, free from freedom and so absolutely determined in its freedom from determination (it is for this reason that Schelling compares the aesthetic absolute to destiny, the objective determination of life that lies beyond all objective determination). Genius must thus remain an “obscure concept” because it exists *outside itself* as the ability to produce things which are outside themselves.

Art, and the genius with which it is synonymous (an identification on which all the writers discussed here, with the exception of Hegel, agree), deals with the “whole man.” This notion of wholeness, which is synonymous with the absolute, is whole insofar as such contradictions are brought to bear in the work of art and the genius which produces it (itself a contradiction that is brought to bear in both):

... the artistic urge also must proceed from such a feeling of inner contradiction. But since this contradiction sets in motion *the whole man* with all his forces, it is undoubtedly one which strikes at the ultimate in him, the root of his whole being [the true in itself]. *It is as if, in the exceptional man (which artists above all are, in the highest sense of the word), that unalterable identity, on which all existence is founded, had laid aside the veil wherewith it shrouds itself in others, and, just as it is directly affected by things, so also works directly back upon*

everything. Thus it can only be the contradiction between conscious and unconscious in the free act which sets the artistic urge in motion; just as, conversely, it can be given to art alone to pacify our endless striving, and likewise to resolve the final and uttermost contradiction within us. (222, emphasis mine)

It is interesting to compare this reference to veiling/unveiling to Kant's famous footnote to #49 of "The Analytic of the Sublime," which also occurs in the context of a discussion of genius. Kant refers to the notion of the veil of Isis as the "most sublime expression" only insofar as it represents our relation to an absolute that can never be unveiled. (Schiller's poem of a few years later demonstrates the catastrophe which awaits anyone bold enough or stupid enough to unveil the absolute.) Schelling, however, is neither bold nor stupid in referring to the unveiling of the absolute that occurs in the work of art (cf. "*It is only the power of art that can unveil it [sc. the absolute] completely,*" 230), for the artist is not trying to see (or know) "the All" but, rather, to resolve the contradictions separating oneself from oneself through the creation of the absolute work of art. It is the very contradiction between a subject who is necessarily an object and an object that is necessarily a subject that "gives rise," in the work of artistic genius, to the "truth in-itself" which reunites both.

Schelling referred, in the passage quoted earlier, to this aesthetic unveiling of the absolute as producing an "infinite tranquility" and refers, here, to "the feeling of an infinite harmony" (223). Such pleasure, according to Schelling, is the "deep feeling" which necessarily accompanies the resolution of the contradiction between a mere object and its real identity with the freedom of the subject. Such a feeling is repeatedly referred to by Schelling as "infinite" because it is a resolution that is not a mere resolution, *per se*, but, rather, a resolution of contradictions that continues within the contradiction itself—a contradiction of resolutions, as it were. Also, it is important to note that such an infinite resolution of a conflict that is no real resolution is not something that can ever be known as such, any more than the absolute can ever be known as such:

So the artist, however deliberate he may be, seems nonetheless to be governed, in regard to what is truly objective in his creation, by a power which separates him from all other men, and compels him to say or depict things which he does not fully understand himself, and whose meaning is infinite. Now every absolute concurrence of the two antithetical activities is utterly unaccountable, being simply a phenomenon which although incomprehensible, yet cannot be denied; and art, therefore, is the one everlasting revelation which yields that

concurrence, and the marvel which, had it existed but once only, would necessarily have convinced us of the absolute reality of that supreme event. (223)

Drawing out one of the necessary implications of his notion of art as the absolute, Schelling is led to the observation that there is really only one artwork: “there is properly speaking but one absolute work of art, which may indeed exist in altogether different versions, yet is still only one . . .” (231). While striking, this notion is really just a corollary of the notion that every artwork, if it is a true artwork, is necessarily infinite and absolute.

Third: The axiom of Schelling’s entire treatise and, indeed, of all his writings, that the absolute can never be known as such (cf. “the supreme absolute reality which never itself becomes objective but is the cause of everything that becomes so,” 224) is only half the story, for as the existence of the aesthetic absolute makes clear the artwork is more, not less, meaningful because of its link with the absolute and separation from any definite objective determination: “So it is with every true work of art, in that every one of them is capable of being expounded ad infinitum, as though it contained an infinity of purposes” (225). Moreover, anticipating an idea that will be more fully expounded in Schelling’s later works (including the *Philosophy of Art*, to be discussed next), Schelling refers to the “mythology of the Greeks, which undeniably contains an infinite meaning and a symbolism for all ideas” (225), as an example of this aesthetic absolute. For, unlike other notions of myth Schelling sees in mythology not fantasy devoid of truth but the expression of an absolute truth of things before that is reduced to so-called objective reality. With respect to myth Schelling is closer to Nietzsche than to Hegel, insofar as he foresaw a return to this higher state of consciousness/unconsciousness as the future destiny of mankind:

Nor is it in general difficult to say what the medium for this return of science to poetry will be; for in mythology such a medium existed, before the occurrence of a breach now seemingly beyond repair. But how a new mythology is itself to arise, which shall be the creation, not of some individual author, but of a new race, personifying, as it were, one single poet—that is a problem whose solution can be looked for only in the future destinies of the world, and in the course of history to come. (233)

As a finite representation of the absolute the artwork can be defined, then, simply as the “infinite finitely displayed.” This succinct formulation leads Schelling to consider the relation of the beautiful to the sublime, which was of course a staple of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century aesthetic thought. As we recall, Kant

had largely reserved the notion of the infinite, and with it the absolute, to the second, “Analytic of the Sublime,” thus giving rise to the false impression that there is a real separation between the two in this regard. Schelling, whose notion of the absolute is essential to all art, is quick to dispel this notion:

But the infinite finitely displayed is beauty. The basic feature of every work of art, in which both the preceding are comprehended, is therefore beauty, and without beauty there is no work of art. There are, admittedly, sublime works of art, and beauty and sublimity in a certain respect are opposed to each other ... *However, although there are sublime works of art, and sublimity is customarily contrasted with beauty, there is actually no true objective opposition between beauty and sublimity; the truly and absolutely beautiful is invariably also sublime, and the sublime (if it is truly so) is beautiful as well.* (226, emphasis mine)

The sentence after the ellipsis in the passage just quoted is one added in Schelling’s copy and meant to replace his earlier attempt to define, *à la Kant*, the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in terms of a *relative* distinction between the beautiful object, wherein the infinite is made finite, and the sublime subject, wherein the finite is made infinite. But since the infinite subject and the finite object are both clearly present in every work of art according to Schelling his added statement makes clear the importance of abandoning this relative distinction when talking about something which is common to every work of art.

If art is “infinite thinking” insofar as it is the representation of an absolute that goes beyond any finite, objective determination, how, again, are we to *understand* such thinking, and what is the relation of this absolute thinking to philosophy? “How is this absolutely nonobjective to be called up to consciousness and understood—a thing needful, if it is the condition for understanding the whole of philosophy?” (229). Conceptual understanding of the absolute is deemed impossible, but that does not preclude the possibility of an “immediate [or ‘intellectual’] intuition”:

Nothing remains, therefore, but for it [the absolute] to be set forth in an *immediate intuition*, though this is itself in turn inconceivable, and, since its object is to be something utterly nonobjective, seems, indeed, to be self-contradictory. But now were such an intuition in fact to exist, having as its object the absolutely identical, in itself neither subjective nor objective, and were we, in respect of this intuition, which can only be an intellectual one, to appeal to immediate experience, then how, in that case, could even this intuition

be in turn posited objectively? ... *This universally acknowledged and altogether incontestable objectivity of intellectual intuition is art itself.* ("Relation of Art to Philosophy," 229, emphasis mine)

Although a number of critics, like Wicks (quoted above), have noted the relation of Schelling's crucial notion of "intellectual intuition" to art, we can state the matter more emphatically: art *is* intellectual intuition, in providing a sensible expression of the absolute which, *pace* Hegel, is superior to any purely intellectual understanding.²³ As we have seen, the artwork is neither subjective nor objective, because both and thus neither, and its "immediate" or "intellectual" intuition" is the only conceivable and "incontestable" way that the absolute renders itself intellectually feasible. And yet, if art renders the absolute intellectually feasible, and as such is separate from and yet joined to philosophy as the knowledge of "first principles," how is one to understand anything of that which art "always already" understands: "So far we've not been able to render this mechanism entirely intelligible, since it is only the power of art which can unveil it completely" (230). In other words, how does one understand art if only art is capable of understanding art? This question is only irresolvable from the point of view of understanding, and this being the case establishes a false premise from which it is impossible to avoid a negative conclusion: that there is no proper understanding of any work of art. But the "proper understanding" of art, which must be faithful to its status as absolute, *is* possible if and when the category of understanding is removed and replaced with a hermeneutic model that reunites the oppositions that are separated for the sake of understanding, including (as Schelling again observes) the notion that any individual artwork is separate from every other: "there is properly speaking but one absolute work of art, which may indeed exist in altogether different versions, yet is still only one, even though it should not yet exist in its most ultimate form" (231). Biblical exegesis (the original hermeneutical model), New Criticism, structuralism,

²³ Michael Vater offers an excellent definition of "intellectual intuition" as it occurred first in Kant and then in Fichte and Schelling but (as I mention in the following chapter) fails to see how this resolves the essential problem he claims undermines Schelling's philosophy, namely, that it is "an empty formalism":

In 1770 Kant defined sensory intuition against the foil of a hypothetical "intellectual intuition," the sort of creative intuition a deity would possess and whose sole analogue in human experience is the artist's symbolic understanding, a knowing in and with the concrete singular, not mediated by abstract universal concepts.

"In and with" indeed—a singular antidote to Hegel's "*sinnliche Erscheinung der Idee*," but one which Vater, who sees Hegel as surpassing Schelling, fails to acknowledge as such.

feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, etc., are all examples of the many ways used to transcend the artificial boundaries that are falsely affixed to art and, instead, constantly discovering new revelations of the truth that is forever hidden “in its most ultimate form” within the work of art. As Žižek notes with regard to Schelling’s notion of the absolute insofar as it informs his notion of textual criticism: “The kernel of unreadability that resists and belies every interpretative appropriation ... is the ultimate guarantee of its identity.”²⁴ Or, as Schelling himself states:

Art is paramount to the philosopher, precisely because it opens to him, as it were, the holy of holies, where burns in eternal and original unity, as if in a single flame, that which in nature and history is rent asunder ... Yet the riddle could reveal itself, were we to recognize in it the odyssey of the spirit, which, marvelously deluded, seeks itself, and in seeking flies from itself; for through the world of sense there glimmers, as if through word the meaning, as if through dissolving mists the land of fantasy, of which we are in search. Each splendid painting owes, as it were, its genesis to a removal of the invisible barrier dividing the real from the ideal world, and is no more than the gateway, through which come forth completely the shapes and scenes of that world of fantasy which gleams but imperfectly through the real. (231–2)

To summarize imperfectly this marvelous statement: art makes real the fantasy that makes a fantasy of the real.

²⁴ Žižek, 26.

Schelling II: *The Philosophy of Art*

According to my entire understanding here, art is itself an emanation of the absolute. Schelling¹

If Homer was a god, let temples be erected to him.

If he was a mortal, let him nonetheless be revered as divine.

Greek Anthology (quoted by Schelling, idem, 53)

Schelling begins his treatise on art (*The Philosophy of Art*, 1801–4) with the same question he had raised earlier in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) regarding the problem of understanding art philosophically and thereby non-artistically:

Who can, I already hear being asked, speak worthily of that divine principle driving the artist, and of that spiritual breath animating his works, other than he who is himself possessed by this sacred flame? Can one really attempt to subject to construction that which is just as incomprehensible in its origin as it is miraculous in its effects? Can one claim to subsume and to determine according to laws that whose essence is precisely to recognize no law other than itself? Or cannot genius be comprehended by concepts just as little as it can be created through methodical principles? *Who dares to claim actual insights into that which is obviously the most free and absolute element in the entire universe? Or to claim an expansion of his own mental horizon beyond the ultimate boundaries in order to establish yet newer boundaries there?* (5, emphasis mine)

Nonetheless, while the question is the same, the answer that Schelling offers here is somewhat different. Where, in his earlier work, Schelling had given the nod to art because of its ability to make the absolute objectively real (“This universally acknowledged and altogether incontestable objectivity of intellectual intuition is art itself ... So far we have not been able to render this

¹ *The Philosophy of Art*, 19.

mechanism entirely intelligible, since it is only the power of art which can unveil it completely”²), here he privileges philosophy because of its ability to “reflect” and thereby know the ideal conditions of art’s absoluteness in ways that the artist cannot: “This is the reason no sensibility can penetrate scientifically more deeply into the interior of art than that of philosophy; indeed, this is why the philosopher possesses better vision within the essence of art than does the artist himself ... the philosopher necessarily possesses an even higher ideal reflex of that which in the artist is real” (6). The philosopher, in other words, can reflect on and so to a certain extent know the absolute in art but cannot produce it, whereby the artist can produce the absolute in art but cannot reflect on it or know it. It is for this reason that there is no real contradiction between Schelling’s different privilegings in these two works, although some have argued that this constitutes a movement away from art.³ This argument leads, I believe, to a failure to understand the answer to Schelling’s attempt to reconcile an otherwise vacuous metaphysics with reality.⁴ It is nonetheless ironic, and cause perhaps for further speculation, that in his earlier, more philosophical, work Schelling privileged art, whereas here, in his most aesthetic work, he privileges philosophy.

As we have seen in Schelling’s earlier treatise, art is inherently philosophical in returning objects to the absolute from which all merely contingent, “real”, objects must emerge, and so the task of understanding what is the very essence of art must fall to philosophy: “*the philosopher is best suited for presenting the unfathomable quality of art, and for recognizing the absolute within it*” (7, emphasis mine). Schelling’s insistence on understanding art in its philosophical relation to the absolute should not, however, be seen as merely one of many options given to us in “understanding” the work of art (cf. structure, form, history, technique, culture, reception, etc.). For, as he makes clear at the outset of this work, art’s relation to the absolute is not really a relation (art *and* the absolute) but, rather, its very essence (art *as* the absolute):

² Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 229–30.

³ See the Preface to this work, in which I discuss Dalia Nassar’s discussion of this in her recent book on *The Romantic Absolute*.

⁴ For example, Michael Vater argues that Schelling’s *Bruno* (1802) seeks “to mitigate claims Schelling made in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* about the superiority of the artist to the philosopher when it comes to intuiting and expressing the nature of the absolute ...” *Bruno*, 18. As the passage quoted clearly shows, Schelling merely gives the philosopher “the nod” with regard to understanding art, and, in any case, art is still seen as essential to metaphysics. Vater’s position is typical of the many otherwise excellent studies of German Idealism which follow Hegel in dismissing the critical importance of art as the absolute.

Such a person behaves merely as a creature of nature and has never really experienced and appreciated art as art. What moves him are perhaps individual moments of beauty, while in the true work of art there is no individualized beauty; only the whole is beautiful. The person who has not yet elevated himself to the idea of the whole is totally incapable of evaluating a work of art ... The more strictly one construes the idea both of art and of the work of art, the more strictly can one provide a corrective both for the laxity of judgment and for those thoughtless attempts made in art or poesy usually undertaken without any idea of what art actually is. (10, italics in the original, underlining mine)

Having introduced the concept of art as absolute Schelling proceeds, in the main body of his work, to defend the notion, first in general ("Part I: General Section of the Philosophy of Art," 23–107), and then in particular ("Part II: Specific Section of the Philosophy of Art," 107–282). Our analysis will focus on the more general Part I, although we will refer when useful to some of the more particular observations of Part II. Part I begins by defining what Schelling means by "God or the absolute" (the terms are interchangeable for Schelling). Some of the statements in this regard are fairly standard and what one would expect: God or the absolute is that infinite Being from which every particular, finite being emerges but is not to be confused with any such thing; the absolute is affirmed in every such thing but is not any such thing; the absolute is the "All"; the absolute is absolutely identical with itself; the absolute is "utterly eternal," that is, God or the absolute is not infinite in time or space but outside time and space altogether ("The absolute cannot be conceived as having preceded anything in time," 25); etc. And yet, as one might expect, some of Schelling's statements with regard to God or the absolute are less commonplace. For example, the "antithesis between the idea and the concrete" within the absolute is impossible (as it is in Spinoza), thereby rendering the absolute "object" as something eternally separate from itself but also separate from this separation in its appearance as an object: "Now, the absolute is precisely that with regards to which no antithesis obtains between the idea and the concrete. In it, that which is the concrete or particular in things is itself the essence or universal (not negation), such that no being can be attributed to God other than that of his idea" (25). The absolute object, in other words, is not the object that it is—a seemingly vacuous formulation that nonetheless corresponds exactly to the aesthetic object as defined by Kant and others.

Another unexpected statement regarding the absolute is Schelling's distinction between the eternal and what he refers to as the "utterly eternal"

(24–5). The distinction is an important one in that the latter is itself beyond eternity as opposed to any concept or notion we may have of same. True eternity can have no relation to time whatsoever (for, among other logical reasons, it already exists in time), just as every artwork, while it exists in time, is always separate from the time in which it exists and is thus “utterly eternal”: “This idea is important for our particular construction [sc. of the “construction of art”] because it shows that time never affects that which is eternal *in itself*; hence, that which is eternal *in itself* has no relationship to time even within time” (25, emphasis in the original). The particular relevance of this different notion of time within the artwork is obvious (cf. narrative “chronology,” musical time signatures, etc.), but what is not so obvious is the fact that this suspension of “real time” is merely a function of art’s relation to the absolute: “Within the absolute itself, there can be no before or after; hence, no single determination can precede or follow any other” (26).

“The absolute as such is neither conscious nor unconscious, neither free nor unfree nor necessary” (26, emphasis in the original). It might be hard to construe a reality that is neither “conscious nor unconscious,” but it is not hard to exemplify hermeneutically, where the truth of the artwork is never what the artwork says or means. (In *Bruno*, Schelling provides a reason for this: the absolute, which can never be real, can only be realized in objects which are not its truth.⁵) Similarly, the artwork must proceed from a “necessity” that is nonetheless not necessary at all, and so, thereby, free from the freedom of freedom itself (as discussed in the preceding chapter). To this Schelling adds: “there is nothing within or outside it that could condition it or to which it could be attracted,” because it follows that the absolute can reside neither within its boundaries nor without—a notion which, similarly, corresponds to the inherent permeability of the artwork which extends (according to Schelling⁶) to all other artworks. Moreover, this is a necessary corollary of Schelling’s insistence (#7, 26) that the separation of different things within the absolute must be a separation which is actually unity—a unity that, paradoxically, requires its own separation to exist: “The All comprehends itself as infinitely affirming, as infinitely affirmed and as the unity of both ... yet it does so, not such that the forms are separated,

⁵ “Furthermore, the soul is not anything that is intrinsically real, since it exists only through its relative opposition to the body; it is only in virtue of this opposition that it seems to be determined to exist in time, that is, only insofar as it is the concept of an individual being.” *Bruno*, 180.

⁶ “... there is properly speaking but one absolute work of art, which may indeed exist in altogether different versions, yet is still only one ...” *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 231.

but rather such that they are resolved into absolute identity.” Again, what is seemingly an absurd notion is readily recognizable in the interpretation of art, where separate works and, indeed, separate critical methodologies, are all potentially one.

This insistence on the permeability of every work distinguishes art as absolute from the absolute of nature, insofar as the particular aspects of “phenomenal nature,” while all ultimately relating to the All, are all separate beings as such: “These consequences of infinite affirmation can also be shown to obtain throughout phenomenal nature, except that here they do not permeate one another as within the absolute All, but are rather separated and asunder” (#9, 26–7). There is thus a *radiant* aspect to all works of art (so-called beauty) that is thus lacking in these phenomenal aspects of nature: “Ideality that dissolves all reality, or that which affirms, is = light. The indifference = organism. Phenomenal nature as such is not a complete revelation of God” (27). These statements about the difference between the All in nature versus its “complete revelation” mark the transition to the explicit discussion of art that will continue throughout the rest of the work.

Before making this transition to the absolute reality of the work of art it is important to note that the aesthetic absolute is a “third thing” that not only combines the reality of nature with the ideality of thought but, as such, is superior to either of those two elements insofar as the absolute absolute, as it were, must be a combination of both (“neither the real nor the ideal world in and for itself can attain ... absolute identity itself,” 27):

The essence of the ideal world is, however, indifference, just as is the essence of the real world. Knowledge and action therefore necessarily integrate themselves in indifference within a third element, which as the element affirming both is the third potency. Here we find art ... (28)

Art is thus neither knowledge in itself nor the real in itself but both, which synthesis is not to be understood as existing *after* these essences (Schelling’s reference to the “third potency” is not to be considered chronologically) but, rather, as the primary or original “absolute absolute” reality of both: “for art is in itself neither mere activity nor mere knowledge, but is rather an activity completely permeated by knowledge ...” That being said, the “full expression of absolute identity as such,” that is, absolute identity as it is understood as opposed to being embodied in something “real,” is the “absolute science of reason or philosophy,” although Schelling seems to waver, as mentioned earlier,

between privileging philosophy over art by virtue of its full expression of the absolute in things:

Hence it is clear that art enjoys the most immediate relationship to philosophy and distinguishes itself from it only by virtue of the determination of particularity or of the reflected nature of its images. For art is, by the way, the highest potency of the ideal world. (29)

It is this notion of art as a third thing uniting absolutely the real and the ideal that leads Schelling to his definition of beauty as the infinitely finite, or the finitely infinite: "Beauty is posited wherever the particular (real) is so commensurate with its concept that the latter itself, as infinite, enters into the finite and is intuited *in concreto*" (29). This notion of beauty (which includes sublimity according to Schelling) should be distinguished from Hegel's later notion of art (discussed in the following chapter) as the "*sinnliche Erscheinung der Idee*" insofar as the idea or ideal is not privileged as that which is struggling to emerge from its absolute unity with its concrete essence. "The real in which it (the concept) appears thereby becomes truly similar and equal to its own idea, the idea in which precisely this universal and this particular are in absolute identity. The rational as rational becomes simultaneously phenomenal or sensuous" (29). This dismantling, or deconstruction, of thought, which Schelling insists upon and Hegel rejects, marks the essential difference between their two philosophies of art.

Beauty as the "infinitely finite" is not unrelated or otherwise inferior to truth (as Hegel argued) but, indeed, the very essence of truth. For the beautiful object in the work of art is not only separate from any objects as such, for that would merely be to construe them negatively, but positively renders the truth of these same objects. But, if every artwork renders the truth of its "object," what does this mean, since we are obviously not talking about any sort of measured, objective truth?

Just as we are accustomed to thinking of truth as the *agreement* of subject and predicate, subject and object, so Schelling defines the truth of the work of art, and its beauty, as the "*identity* of the subjective and the objective" (31, emphasis mine). As we know from our earlier discussion of Fichte's essay on art, the beautiful art object is not separate from its spectator but, rather, the very objectivity of its subject, and vice versa. That is, the art *work* is the unity of subjective freedom and objective determination, as the original truth of the object's objective determination. The young woman in Vermeer's "Girl with a

Pearl,” or a bowl of fruit by Chardin, are beautiful because they go beyond any objective determination by uniting same with an objectivity that is based, not on objectivity *per se* but on an objectivity that comes from the subjective (“ideal”) origin of all objectivity.

As we argued in Chapter 1, with regard to Diotima’s notion of absolute truth and beauty in the *Symposium* (and which we shall return to in our final chapter on Schopenhauer’s similar reading of Plato): “Truth that is not beauty is also not absolute truth, and vice versa” (Schelling, 31). The artwork is synonymous with beauty, even when it is “ugly,” because it is the original truth of things before they are separated into “mere” objects that are objectively determined as such and, correlatively, into “mere” subjects that are supposedly separate from such objective determinations. (The “subject,” as Fichte rightly argued, is nothing more than the objective determination of a subject that is absolute.) “Only absolute beauty in art is also genuine and actual truth” (31): in this sense the Parthenon, for example, or van Gogh’s famous *Shoes*, are a truer truth than all the objective determinations in the world, not for any sentimental reason but for the most objective reason of all: because they represent the absolute as the “origin”—Heidegger’s *Ursprung*—of everything.

In addition to truth and beauty as synonymous with the aesthetic absolute, Schelling invokes “goodness”:

For the same reason, goodness that is not beauty is also not absolute goodness, and vice versa. For goodness, too, in its absoluteness, becomes beauty—in every disposition, for example, whose morality no longer depends on the struggle of freedom with necessity, but rather expresses the absolute harmony and reconciliation of both. (31)

As in Plato’s *Symposium*, “goodness” is invoked here as an absolute beauty that is separate from any subjective determination whatsoever. Art as absolute is thus always moral goodness, not, again, for any sentimental reason but, to the contrary, for the most rigorous, “unsentimental” reason of all, namely, that the aesthetic, or beauty, is absolute and thereby separate from any subjective determination or desire. It is for this reason that Kant insisted on the separation of art from desire, insofar as the latter is always the desire of a subject for an object in reality. The beautiful art “object” is not an object of desire because it is an object of beauty and as such separate from any subjectivity or objectivity *per se*.

If beauty is our link with the absolute, then it is also the case that the absolute is our link with the beautiful. It is highly doubtful, then, whether

Schelling would have agreed with Schiller's (or Nietzsche's⁷) condemnation of the "Egyptian youth who persisted in his desire to see 'the All,'"⁸ for: "... the absolute identity of the real and ideal All is necessarily primal, that is, absolute beauty itself" (31). To that extent the universe, as it is in God, is also to be viewed as an absolute work of art in which: "All things as they are in themselves or within God are just as absolutely beautiful as they are absolutely true" (32). Evil, and "perverted or ugly things," are understood as existing outside of the absolute, and of beauty: "Perverted or ugly things, however, just as error or falsity, consist of mere privation and belong only to the temporal [sc. real, non-aesthetic] view of things." To speak, then, of an ugly or perverted work of art is to utter nonsense, an idea which is not contradicted by the presence of ugliness or perversion *in* a work of art.

The relation of our cognitive understanding to the work of art, which is that of finite understanding to that which exceeds it, is thus analogous to the relation of knowledge to a real world, or universe, that always exceeds it. For this reason, science fails to acknowledge the aesthetic basis of all understanding and, conversely, aesthetics succeeds in rendering the ultimate truth of that same "real world": "The divine creation is represented objectively through art, for that creation is based on the same informing of infinite ideality into the real upon which art is also based" (31–2). "Imagination"—*Einbildungskraft*—is thus singled out as a "splendid German word" because it refers to the understanding of the unity "upon which all creation is really based" that is only known through the figurative (*bildliche*) imagination, as opposed to understanding.

Finally, because of this foundational, axiomatic notion of art as absolute, "*The immediate cause of all art is God*" (32, emphasis Schelling's). Like Barthes, Foucault and others, Schelling has himself declared the "death of the author" in terms which do much to clarify this easily misunderstood notion. Everything that is represented in a work of art is thus divine insofar as it is created, not by the "artist" (who or whatever that might be) but by God, which is as much a scientific as it is a theological notion of the reality of the work of art as such. To speak of art as presenting the "forms of things" is thus incomplete insofar as art presents the forms of things "as they are within God or in themselves": "*The true construction of art is a presentation of its forms as forms of things as those things are in themselves, or as they are within the absolute*" (32, emphasis Schelling's).

⁷ See the Appendix of this work for a discussion of Nietzsche's seeming denunciation of Schiller's poem.

⁸ "The Veiled Statue at Sais," *Schiller's Works*.

What does it mean to say that art presents things as they are in themselves, as absolute, when clearly Schelling does NOT mean that art presents *the* thing in itself, which he and others would deem absurd? The key to resolving this contradiction, and understanding this paradox, is the thrice repeated “as.” Art does not present the thing in itself, but rather its forms “as forms of things as those things are in themselves, or as they are within the absolute.” Note the relevance of this small word to the entire world of figuration (“like or as”), which it serves to unlock as a small but essential key. What the painter paints, or the poet describes, is not the object as such but the object *before* it exists as the object as such. Nor can this “before” ever become an object, because it will always exist before the object as such. This so-called “form” is thus better described as an *essence*, as an essential reality created by a subject that does not yet exist as such and so exists together with the object that does not yet exist as such—i.e. as absolute. This can only always be an “as” because it can never be an object separate from a subject (or vice versa). It must, then, always have the status of figuration, but as a necessary figuration (or catachresis) which, as the only possible way the absolute can be rendered, is, as it were, true.

This is why Schelling insists on the analogy between God and the artist: “the universe is formed within God as eternal beauty and as an absolute work of art.” Schelling is not talking about the real world, or the real universe—neither of which he would consider beautiful; he is referring teleologically to the underlying principle of creation *before* things are created as such. This absolute world-before-the-world (which can only be ridiculed as a notion from the point of view of the real world) is a thing of beauty because it has nothing to do with a world that is separated into subjects and objects. The “artist” who in the same way creates a world-before-the-world thus creates an absolute “object” that is absolutely no different from that of the teleo-theo-logical creator. One could rightly say, then, that in Schelling’s view neither one of these—God or the artist—is privileged over the other.

“This proposition completes the construction of the universal idea of art. Art has been designated as the real representation of the forms of things as they are in themselves ...” We will now turn to the second section of Part I in which Schelling demonstrates—still in general terms—how the particular content of various works of art represents “the forms of things as they are in themselves,” sc. as absolute.

Schelling begins the second section of Part I of his *Philosophy of Art* by referring to the preceding section:

In #24 we proved that the forms of art must be the forms of things as they are within the absolute or in themselves. Accordingly, we are presupposing that these *particular forms*—precisely those by means of which beauty is represented in individual, real, actual things—are particular forms within the absolute. The question is how is this possible. (This is the same problem expressed in general philosophy by the transition of the infinite into the finite, of unity into multiplicity.) (33, italics in the original, underlining mine)

How, in other words, is it possible for a particular work of art to be absolute, since to be absolute must be to exceed any particularity whatsoever? The particular work of art cannot be what it is if it is absolute, and, conversely, if it is absolute it cannot be anything particular. The artwork must thus conjoin both the *actuality* of itself and the *possibility* of what it might be (sc. its freedom); how is this possible?

To resolve this problem Schelling returns to a statement that he had made earlier, that the true universe is not the scientific universe but the teleological totality of everything (“the All”). This relation of particular things that are absolute is also realized in the so-called “individual” work of art, which as a particular thing is nonetheless completely separate from its particularity and conjoined with every other work of art as well as the absolute itself. The difference here between the philosophical idea of the absolute and its artistic counterpart is striking. To use one of Schelling’s examples, one can look at the form “Man” as a particular that is separate from its own discrete objective reality *and* one with the absolute unity of the universe, but, in the work of art, this separation of “Man” from its objective reality and its freedom from actuality is not just a possibility, but an actuality.

Schelling’s notion of the absolute is that of a particular which is separate from everything, including itself, and thus also one with everything. By applying this notion to art we can understand the latter, and vice versa. “The concept of the absolute separateness of the particular is especially important for art, since art’s ultimate effect is based on precisely this separation of forms. Yet this separation obtains only because each is absolute within itself” (34). In other words, because every artwork is ultimately the same as every other work it must also be unique and different from every other artwork. And, finally, the fact that such absolute artworks inevitably give birth to ideas is because “ideas” are defined by Schelling

as exactly that: the unity of a particular that is both the same as and different from the particular to which it refers:

Even the first author of the doctrine of ideas [Plato] understood the same thing by this even if he did not explain it in just this way ... *This double unity of every idea is actually the mystery by which the particular can be comprehended both within the absolute and, in spite of this, also as a particular.* (35, emphasis mine)

My notion of a “critical doubling” which “denies itself as such” or, in Žižek’s words, “posits itself as grounded in and simultaneously different from” itself,⁹ is central to Schelling’s “system.” Here Schelling refers “the mystery by which the particular can be comprehended within the absolute” to the important role of the gods, and mythology, in art: “Our systematic construction of art leads us back precisely to the point to which instinct first led poesy at its inception. What ideas are for philosophy, the gods are for art, and vice versa.” The important thing to keep in mind when considering Schelling’s notion of the role of the gods is that they must be viewed as absolutely real, for, “Anyone who has not yet elevated himself to the level upon which the absolutely ideal is also immediately the absolutely real for him possesses neither philosophical nor poetic sensibility.” This is crucial, because the gods are nothing more nor less than the personification of the absolute, aesthetic particular which, as absolute, must also not exist as such. In this respect, every artwork is not only “divine” but, more precisely, a particular divinity: “Every idea [as defined above], therefore, = god, but a particular god.” It is for this reason that, by declaring that every artwork is the absolute and so constitutes what is really “real,” ordinary reality is to be subordinated as “mere fiction”:

The question posed by ordinary consciousness concerning reality is of no significance regarding what is absolute, neither in a poetic nor in a philosophical sense. This *common* reality is no true reality at all, but is rather in the true sense nonreality. (35, italics, underlining in the original)

To declare the divinity of every artwork is thus tantamount to declaring that ordinary reality is not only relatively unimportant but, stronger still, a “fiction of a fiction,” that is, an “objective truth” that, as such, is a fictional misrepresentation of a higher, aesthetic reality that constitutes its truth. Although this

⁹ *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, 35. See also 43, 54, 73, *et passim*. Similarly, Dalia Nassar notes: “As indifferent, then, the absolute must not exclude difference, but must contain difference within itself, such that “unity and opposition, the self-identical and the nonidentical are on.” *The Romantic Absolute*, 239–40.

would seem to stand Plato's view of art on its head, it is in fact consistent with Diotima's mythic view of the absolute discussed earlier in this work, as well as Schopenhauer's reading of the Platonic "Idea" as aesthetic, discussed in the penultimate chapter of this work.

The possibilities (or "potentialities") represented in art are thus more actual than the actualities of "ordinary consciousness." That is because the absolute, which is the actuality of all artworks, is always only a possibility (e.g. the teleological possibility of our original Being), but a possibility that is the only possible way of knowing or representing who we really are and what the reality of everything may be. "All figures and forms in art, and thus particularly the gods, are *actual* because they are *possible*" (emphasis Schelling's). This is precisely why Schelling goes on to ridicule those who would ridicule the belief, practice or worship of such possibilities, something attributable to such rational thinkers as Socrates himself. This is not just a *tu quoque* argument against such skeptics, but, further, another important statement by Schelling that such possibilities are more real because they are "mere possibilities."

The Greeks did not at all take the gods to be real in the sense, for example, that common understanding believes in the reality of physical objects; from that perspective the Greeks considered the gods to be neither real nor unreal. In the higher sense they were more real for the Greeks than every other reality. (35)

The ultimate paradoxical essence of all art, which Cleanth Brooks posited as such but did not explain,¹⁰ is due to the very essence of the absolute as that which is finite and infinite, limited and unlimited: "The determining law of all gods is pure limitation on the one hand, and undivided absoluteness on the other." In order to exemplify this idea Schelling notes how the Greek gods, while absolute, are nonetheless marked by their equally severe limitations. Because such limitations, however, are necessary in order for their unlimited power to exist, they are not really limitations. Such are very different from other kinds of limitations that are truly limited: "For the mystery of all life is the synthesis of the absolute with limitation" (36). Said "mystery" is not, again, mystical, but rather the very real, scientific even, essential feature of life, for the limited "scientific" view of things necessarily requires the previous unlimited absolute from which all such limitations later emerge. Such mystery is, however, "fantastic" (37) in that this higher unity—Athena's wisdom, for example exceeds ordinary wisdom

¹⁰ Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," *The Well-Wrought Urn*, 3–21.

as its absolute origin—is that from which such limited wisdom may only later emerge. This, Schelling adds, is the “law of the universe,” namely, the creation of particulars from an absolute that always exceeds those particulars as its higher, ‘fantastic’ truth: “According to the same law the universe forms and molds itself within the reflex of human creative imagination into a world of fantasy whose consistent and pervading law is absoluteness in limitation” (37). It is for this reason also that Schelling notes the almost constant presence of wit or “jesting” among the Olympians, for since any limitation of the absolute is merely provisional and thereby limited in its own limitations, it must allow for such jokes, “for one is allowed to joke with limitation, since it takes nothing away from the [absolute] essence and is within itself nullity, or nothingness. Hence, the most brazen jesting plays about within the world of the Greek gods . . .” (37). However, such jesting can come about only because of the co-presence of “absolute chaos,” the pure formlessness that is also inextricably part of the absolute.

Before the Olympians there were the Titans, “a world of misshapen and frightful forms [which] must perish before the mild realm of the blessed and enduring gods can enter.” A world where “chaos must devour its own children,” figuratively and literally (in the case of Saturn). Out of such an incessantly incestuous, internecine world and only out of such a world “does heaven become clear and Zeus take serene possession of tranquil Olympus” (38), but this means also that the now limited absolute is still linked to the chaos of its own formlessness. While now “well-defined, clearly drawn characters replace all the indefinite and formless deities,” such forms are, according to Schelling, themselves “fantastic” and thereby never very far from the chaos out of which they emerge, and therefore such figures of fantasy are not comprehensible by either reason or understanding: “The world of the gods is the object neither of mere understanding nor of reason, but rather can be comprehended only by fantasy.” (Schelling’s debt to the synthesis of judgment in Kant’s third *Critique* is clearly evident here.)

Judging by the Homeric world and the behavior of the Greek gods the absolute is neither moral nor immoral. The difference between the divine and human is that, in the former case, the absolute as part of the “infinity of infinity” proceeds to return to finitude, whereas the human proceeds contrariwise, from the finitude of its own objective limitations to the infinite (the universal, the divine, etc.): “Just as morality is the assumption of the finite or particular into the infinite, so is blessedness [the “absolute blessedness” of the gods] the assumption of the infinite into the finite or the particular” (39). Humans are

restricted by “gravity” from which they proceed to free themselves, whereas the gods “exist” in a divine state of blessedness that floats above the ground and so always takes precedence over every limitation, despite the presence of such limitations:

In the former [sc. Human] instance, in which the particular is taken up into the universal, the particular is subjected to the law as the universal and behaves like a body obeying gravity. For precisely that reason, the gods, in whose nature both unities are united, do not live a dependent, determined life, but rather a free and independent one. As particular beings they nonetheless enjoy the blessedness of the absolute, and vice versa (to strive towards blessedness = to strive as a particular to partake of absoluteness). (39)

Because the gods do not have “to strive towards blessedness” (sc. the absolute) but are already there they cannot possibly act either morally or immorally (“morality ... is not something that could be attributed to the gods”), whereas humans, who can only strive towards such a state but are ultimately grounded within themselves as such by the law of *gravitas* are forced to place limits even on the very absolute towards which they strive. (While gods often make laws for others, they are not bound to follow them themselves.) As a limit posed on beings in the name of the absolute (the law as universal) the law and/or morality is not, nor ever can be, absolute, and for this same reason the absolute (the divine) can never be limited, as everything moral or immoral must be. The “golden rule” of “Love thy neighbor” is only an absolute if it ceases to be a law, as Kant correctly argued and as Christ clearly intended. Schelling’s figure for this is that of a decentered center: “they [the gods] are simultaneously as particulars nonetheless absolute—within themselves—and on the other hand in that absoluteness nonetheless particular. *Accordingly, they are both outside of and in their own centers*” (emphasis mine). The curious condition of floating is to be “outside and in one’s own center,” which is characteristic of everything divine. Such divine being, Schelling concludes, is only moral to the extent that all morality strives towards this very state of decentered centering (e.g. the universal law). It is for this reason that, while the Greek gods are certainly capable of acting badly they never act immorally (“We all know how much has been said concerning the immorality of his [Homer’s] gods—however, this standard of measurement cannot be applied to these higher beings of fantasy,” 38). Finally, since the divine/absolute of which Schelling is speaking is completely synonymous with the divinity or absoluteness of the work of art,

his argument here is completely applicable to any discussion of the morality/immorality in art, a discussion which has often reached the same conclusion as Schelling, without, however, his careful deduction of this empirical truth from the status of art as absolute.

Although the absolute/divine/art is never moral or immoral, the absolute/divine/art is always beautiful: "*The basic law of all portrayals of the gods is the law of beauty, for beauty is the absolute intuited in reality*" (40, italics in the original, underlining mine). It is this notion of a grounded lack of grounding, of a decentered center, that Schelling identifies with beauty as "the infinite reflected in the finite" that is never the same as the thing in which it is contained. For this reason, Schelling notes, the ugliest of the Greek gods, the lame blacksmith Hephaestus, is nonetheless beautiful in that his limitations merely serve as a reminder of all the limitations that are transcended by the infinite in which, like the "unquenched laughter of the gods" at Hephaestus, they are dissolved. The choice of the lame Hephaestus to represent the beauty of the gods is also significant in that it again brings up the question of gravity/*gravitas*, as well as a connection with the tragic beauty of Oedipus, another lame (in both senses of the word) "god."

"Every encounter with common reality or with concepts of that reality necessarily destroys the fascination and charm of these beings [the gods]." Just as there can be no real connection with the ordinary, real or quotidian world and that of the gods, there can be no connection between anything real, objective or ordinary and the work of art, for the artwork is essentially separate from the object that it represents, or that is represented in it. While Hegel made the observation that with the advent of the modern or "romantic" stage of art ordinary reality appears for the first time (he uses Cervantes' masterpiece as an example of this transition), Don Quixote is no more an ordinary man, nor his world the real world, than Hephaestus, because the aesthetic reality of both has nothing whatsoever to do with the everyday reality of either.

As an example of the absoluteness of all divinity and, by extension, all works of art, Schelling mentions the goddess Athena (Minerva). As we have seen, the absolute must deny the very form or forms in which it asserts itself or it is not absolute, and this is plainly evident in the goddess, who "though born of no mother's womb, is within herself the most fertile of all deities" (42). For Athena is "simultaneously archetype and eternal designer of all art as well as the terrible destroyer of cities, both the one who wounds and the one who heals ... both goddess of war as well as of preservation, of male as well as of female." Athena

is not just *a* god, she is *the* god, insofar as she represents the very absoluteness of every work of art and every work of philosophy:

In her strictness (pure form) she is the same goddess of the philosopher, the artist, and the warrior, and her majesty consists above all in the following: Even though she alone of all gods unifies antitheses, neither disturbs the other within her, and in her image everything is reduced to one factor, namely, that she is immovable, eternally selfsame and unchangeable wisdom. (42)

This essential denial of the very form in which art asserts itself as absolute, which explains the curious “existence” of gods like Athena, leads Schelling to declare not only all art as “mythological” in its scientific expression of the absolute, but also as inherently *symbolic*: “Representation of the absolute with absolute indifference of the universal and the particular *within the particular* is possible only symbolically” (45, emphasis in the original). Put simply: if art is the absolute, and all art is also symbolic, this is because there is no other way to represent the absolute than symbolically. Symbolism is carefully distinguished by Schelling from both *schematism* and *allegory*, for which it is a sort of synthesis of both. The problem with these two constitutive elements is that they both fail to account for the poetic/mythological freedom that is essential to the absolute as such. That is, since the absolute must conjoin both subject and object in an object that is not “merely” the object that it is, allegory, which defines the object purely in terms of the subject, and schematism, which defines the subject purely in terms of the object it projects, are both deemed inadequate for failing to render the reality (object) of the idea (subject) in such a way that the *work* (art or myth) is neither one nor the other but both:

In allegory the particular merely means or signifies the universal; in mythology it itself is simultaneously also the universal ... In Homer, and in the representations of the plastic arts, one could not escape the fact that the myths are not meant allegorically, but rather with absolute poetic independence and as reality in and for themselves. (47)

Put differently: the problem with allegory and schematism is that they both know what they are about, whereas the artwork “is” what it is *about*—sc. the representation of the absolute—and cannot therefore know it. All symbols, on the other hand, are finite expressions of an infinite that returns back to its own finitude and so, therefore, can never be known as such. Because of this, Schelling explains, the allegorical element is to be expected as a recognition of the necessary movement away from the particular as such within the artwork,

but the very real “possibility” of finding such an external meaning is nonetheless a loss of the internal meaning of the work itself that is always already there as its absolute truth: “This indifference [Schelling’s term for the unity of the absolute discussed in the preceding chapter] was the *first element* here. Homer did not first render these myths independently poetic and symbolic; they were such from the very beginning” (48; emphasis Schelling’s). That is to say, the allegorical “higher truths” which emerged only long after the creation of these poetic works themselves fail to render the still higher absolute truth of the works themselves that were there “from the very beginning.”

The separation of the allegorical element in them was only something that occurred to a later period, something possible only after all poetic spirit was extinguished. Hence, one can also demonstrate convincingly—and I will do so in what follows—that the Homeric myth, and to that extent Homer himself, was absolutely the first element in and the beginning of Greek poesy. The allegorical poesy and *philosopheme*, as Heyne calls it, were entirely the work of later periods. The synthesis is first ... Hence, we also see clearly that mythology concludes as soon as allegory begins. (48)

The problem with allegorical interpretations is that they are too rational and thus dismiss the irrational element in art which, according to Schelling, is essential to its very being as the expression of an absolute that can never be known as such—only in this sense is it “irrational.” In contrast with allegory, the symbol (which is the “requirement of absolute artistic representation,” 49) is both rational and material in conjoining meaning with the sensible, as opposed to privileging one or the other as happens with allegory and schematization:

Meaning here is simultaneously being itself, passed over into the object itself and one with it. As soon as we allow these beings to mean or signify something, they themselves are no longer anything. Their reality is one with their ideality; that is, their idea, their concept is also destroyed to the extent that they are not conceived as actual. Their ultimate charm resides precisely in the fact that they, by simply being as they are without any reference to anything else—absolute within themselves—simultaneously always allow the meaning itself to be dimly visible. I emphasize that we are not satisfied with mere meaningless being, such as that given by a mere image. Just as little are we satisfied with mere meaning. Rather, whatever is to be the object of absolute artistic representation should be as concrete and self-identical as the image, and yet as universal and significant as the concept. Hence, the German language renders the word symbol excellently with the term *Sinnbild*.

“Meaning passed over into the object and one with it”: it is easy to miss the meaning of Schelling’s argument here in failing to realize the true nature of an artwork that is as meaningful as it is sensible and vice versa. Perhaps one should think of J. Hillis Miller’s statement that in artistic illustration “word and image come together at the origin of each.”¹¹ Contrariwise, one should contrast this with Hegel’s very different notion of art whereby the sensible is separate from the idea that emerges from it, whereas, for Schelling, “As soon as we allow these beings to mean or signify something, they themselves are no longer anything.” As we shall see in the following chapter, it is precisely this difference that leads Hegel to reject, and Schelling to privilege, the aesthetic absolute as such.

All attempts to understand art and myth are doomed to failure because they don’t really understand the nature of “intellectual intuition” which is required to experience the aesthetic absolute. If one were to understand art’s link with teleology, as was argued in the earlier chapter on the teleological section of Kant’s third *Critique*, one would know better than to ascribe any meaning or intention to art other than one which denies the very meaning or intention it ascribes because, just as one can’t know the origin (or end) of things, one can’t know the work of art that represents precisely that origin (or end) of things. Long before there was any concept of an “intentional fallacy” Kant had laid the groundwork for this idea, and Schelling brought it to complete fruition:

The poetic renderings of mythology can be understood neither as intentional nor as unintentional—not intentional, for in that case they would be conceived for the sake of some specific meaning, which is impossible ... not unintentional, since they are not void of meaning ... the poetic renderings of mythology are simultaneously meaningful and meaningless—meaningful because they represent a universal in the particular, meaningless because they represent both with absolute indifference, such that the element in which they are different is itself nonetheless absolute and has integrity in and for itself. (51)

And long before the post-modern “death of the author,” Schelling wrote: “Mythology can be neither the work of an individual person nor of a collectivity nor of the race ... but rather exclusively of the collectivity to the extent that it itself constitutes an individual and is the equal of an individual person.” That is to say, while the artwork is made by individual “authors” we must understand those “individuals” as absolute and, as we stated earlier (following Schelling), ultimately one with all other individuals and individual works of art. Thus

¹¹ *Illustration*, 74.

Schelling is not speaking here of anonymous authorship and unsigned works of art. Rather, it is precisely because there are no individuals relative to the absolute that there are only individuals relative to the absolute: "It is precisely only in art that nature is able to effect such concord between the individual and the species ... it is the work of a collectivity that is simultaneously an individual" (52–3).

In concluding our reading of this section of Schelling's *Philosophy of Art* we will focus on his own concluding comments (73–83) concerning the shift which occurs with the transition from the ancient to the modern world, and how this relates to Schelling's overriding concern here with seeing art as the expression of the absolute. The major difference, according to Schelling, between these two periods is that the Greeks synthesized the infinite with the finite into perfect symbols; they had no miracles, no angels, because theirs is a world where everything infinite is finite, and where the gods are as present everywhere as they are absent (angels are, according to Schelling, an attempt to recreate this presence in a world where finitude is no longer holy). The modern world is thus marked by a certain paradoxicality insofar as the finite is now the only reality and as such must refer to, and yet have no relation to, the infinite reality from which it must emerge: "Here, in the modern world, change and transformation are the reigning law. All that is finite passes away here, since it does not exist in and for itself, but rather only for the sake of signifying the infinite" (73). Modern art, then, is characterized by a certain flight from the very objective rendering that is nonetheless deemed necessary as its only real reality. "That being the case,"

we can assert that until that time in the yet undetermined and distant future when the world spirit itself has completed the great poem upon which it now reflects, and when the succession of the modern world has transformed itself into a simultaneity—until that point, every great poet is called to structure from this evolving (mythological) world a world of which his own age can reveal to him only a part. I repeat: from this world he is to structure into a whole that particular part revealed to him, and to create from the content and substance of that world *his* mythology. (74)

Schelling's first example of this modern private mythology in which the absolute is rendered provisionally ("until that time in the yet undetermined future") in an objective form that is not that of the absolute to which it aspires, is Dante, whose *Commedia* represents the plight of an insignificant individual who is privileged to see a supposedly divine world that is no longer that of the

Church nor, for that matter, that of any truly unified system. (It is thus possible to draw a straight line connecting Dante with Kafka.) While Dante's work is no longer that of the absolute system it nonetheless represents that separation from the absolute. Similarly, Shakespeare is described as having created "his own mythological circle" by utilizing the reality of historical figures in order to represent an absolute (in the case of *Macbeth*, the divine figure "of no woman born") that can only exist supernaturally through phantasms such as that of the three witches; Cervantes has fashioned his Quixote as the real but ridiculous incarnation of someone or something divine and, finally, Faust is mentioned in the same breath as "a genuinely mythological poem" that likewise renders the absolute through a historically real figure who is thus never really capable of rendering the absolute after which he is incessantly striving, and which, in Part II, he is only able to achieve through the creation of his own private mythology.

It is important to weigh carefully the poetic value of such figures, for, despite the fact that the modern world is a world of contingency in which the absolute can no longer appear as it had with the genuine mythology of the Greeks, the modern artist is able to "create his own poetic circle for himself" through originality:

First of all, according to what I have just proved, the fundamental law of modern poesy is *originality* (in the art of antiquity this was by no means the case in just this sense). Every truly creative individual must himself create his own mythology ... This mythology, however, will quite definitely be *created*, and is not allowed to be designed simply according to the instructions of certain ideas of philosophy, since in the latter case it would likely be impossible to give it independent poetic life. (75, emphasis in the original)

Originality is the new god, the new mythology, of modern art. Schelling's system of understanding art in terms of its essential link to the absolute allows us to understand this now somewhat clichéd statement more deeply. Originality is not to be understood as "mere particularity" or, as Kant warns, "original nonsense,"¹² but in the sense of Heidegger's famous essay on "The Origin of the Artwork" as referring to art as the expression of absolute "Being." Originality, for Heidegger and for Schelling, is the creation of what is *created*, of what is absolute. Originality means the creation of what is absolute, of what comes from

¹² *Critique of Judgment*, 168 (#46).

the origin. That is to say, genuine originality must be the creation of creation itself (since we no longer believe in our creation myths), the production, not just of something new, but of newness itself. Newness itself is the absolute because newness itself is, like the absolute, that from which something comes, not that something. It is for this reason that Schelling notes that for the modern artist the choice of subject is irrelevant ("Every truly creative individual must himself create his own mythology, and this can occur using virtually any material or content"). The choice of subject is irrelevant because the task of the modern artist is to produce a mythic object that is never the object as such but, rather, that absolute from which the object as such emerges. We may better understand this peculiarity of modern art by describing it as the realm of "god without god," for, while it is lacking in the creation of a deity that is believed in as such, it nonetheless produces something divine or absolute: "We rather await its [our "idealist culture's"] gods, gods for which we are already holding the symbols ready perhaps even before they have developed in the culture itself independently from physics" (77).

This transition to modernity has also fundamentally changed our view of nature. Whereas the Greeks saw nature as completely one with the divine and the absolute, the modern world views nature objectively as conforming to the mechanistic laws of understanding (hence Kant's view of nature as largely synonymous with the understanding (*Verstand*) of natural science). The divine is relegated to a higher world which is effectively removed from this one, thus leaving nature as purely prosaic (objective). The debasement of the divine in the supernatural, superstition, astronomy, magic, or miracles is seen by Schelling as evidence of this modern transformation in which the divine is no longer seen as real. Astrology, for example, is markedly different from the earlier "idea of the animation of the stars, and the idea that they are guided in their orbits by internal souls, [which] were opinions that had been preserved from the days even of Plato and Aristotle" (78).

The "Copernican Revolution" is also synonymous with this cosmic shift in which God has effectively "left the building," or at least the earth. However, with regard to the present project, art becomes one of the most important ways, in the modern world, that the divine, or absolute, asserts itself in opposition to the objective laws of nature. In this sense art can be likened to the abovementioned debased spiritual phenomena (magic, miracles, astrology, etc.), although art returns the absolute to a nature or reality from which it has disappeared, and thereby presents the absolute as inherently separate from itself:

For the sake of the overall context, we must first recall an earlier proposition (#28) containing the principle for the entire investigation. It established in general that the ideas can be viewed objectively or in reality and as gods, and that the world of ideas can accordingly be viewed as a world of the gods. *This world is the content or material of all poesy.* Wherever it generates itself, it produces the highest indifference of the absolute with the particular within the real world. (78, emphasis mine)

Finally, although Schelling often speaks of the modern turn in art as rendering it inferior to its classical counterpart, he just as often notes that in modern art “the negative as such can also again acquire that form that is able to encompass perfection” (53). But if art is seen by Schelling as the way that the absolute can assert itself in the modern world, one might also expect that, just as “art for art’s sake” gives more importance to art in the modern world than had been the case in the ancient, it would thus be the case that the “aesthetic absolute” is more, not less, viable in modernity. Certainly the explicit arguments for this new understanding of art would lead us to recognize, if not the greater importance of art, at least the greater importance of this recognition.

Hegel: *The Encyclopaedia and Lectures on Aesthetics*

It is ironic that the philosopher most closely associated with the notion of “art and the absolute”¹ is also the one furthest from this idea as it informs the works of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer;² that the philosopher who provided the richest and most detailed investigation of the entire history of the literary and visual arts was also the least sensitive to their meaning; and that the philosopher who was most adamant about the philosophical value of art³ was also the least willing to accept “art’s claim to truth” (Vattimo). As the editor of an important volume on the aesthetic writings of the period in question here has written:

The main point is that, after the exalted estimation of art in the different theories of Schelling and Schopenhauer, art is once again relegated by Hegel ... [to] an early stage in the development of *Geist* (spirit) toward self-recognition ...⁴

Indeed, it may turn out to be the case, after we have completed our study of Hegel’s idea of art as it relates to his idea of the absolute, that this curious ambivalence explains why the notion—and to a lesser extent the philosophers who have proffered it—has suffered the neglect that we have had numerous

¹ One need only point to William Desmond’s *Art and the Absolute*, whose subtitle is “A Study of Hegel’s Aesthetics.” Although I agree with many of Desmond’s points, the author’s spirited defense of Hegel’s ambivalence towards the “aesthetic absolute,” and his adoption of Hegel’s notion that art is no longer capable of revealing the absolute (see “Art and the Absolute Revisited: The Neglect of Hegel’s Aesthetics” in *Hegel and Aesthetics* [ed. William Maker], 4) runs counter to the thesis proffered here.

² I do not disagree with Robert Wicks’ contention (*Hegel’s Theory of Aesthetic Judgment*) that Hegel’s theory, and his understanding of art’s relation to the absolute, is derived from Kant, although Wicks agrees that Hegel’s formulation of this relation is decidedly different. See Chapter 1, “Kant’s Aesthetics,” 5–33.

³ “The most important historical result of Hegel’s own treatment of art was to open the way for art to become regarded as a vehicle for raising what were previously treated as distinctly philosophical issues ...” Jere Surber, “Art as a Mode of Thought,” in *Hegel and Aesthetics*, 46.

⁴ David Simpson, *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel*, 199.

occasions to comment on while carrying out the various analyses here. For if, as Jean-Luc Nancy (among many others) argues, “Hegel est le penseur inaugural du monde contemporain,”⁵ then it would be to him that we largely owe the modern/contemporary view of art’s separation from metaphysics in general and the absolute in particular.⁶

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Encyclopaedia I. Before turning to Hegel’s more explicit discussion of art in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* and at the conclusion of the third volume of the *Encyclopaedia*, we will examine Hegel’s notion of the absolute in the context of the Kantian notions from which they depart in the section of *Encyclopaedia I* devoted to “The Critical Philosophy.” As is well known, Hegel thinks of the absolute as the relation of thought to itself through the dialectical mediation of a reality which is “overcome” by “thought and nothing but thought” whereas Kant (and Schelling after him, who had considered Hegel’s emphasis on thought itself as “negative philosophy”⁷) had conceived of the absolute “supersensible” as inherently separate even from the very mind which conceives it. This, according to Hegel, was Kant’s mistake:

The [Kantian] Thing-in-itself (and under ‘thing’ is embraced even Mind and God) expresses the object when we leave out of sight all that consciousness makes of it, all its emotional aspects, and all specific thoughts of it. It is easy to see what is left—utter abstraction, total emptiness, only described still as an ‘other-world’—the negative of every image, feeling, and definite thought. Nor does it require much penetration to see that this *caput mortuum* is still only a product of thought, such as accrues when thought is carried on to abstraction unalloyed: that it is the work of the empty ‘Ego,’ which makes an object out

⁵ Hegel: *L'inquiétude du négatif*, 5. Cf. Fredric Jameson’s comment in his recent book *The Hegel Variations*: “It is certain that Hegel is what might anachronistically be called an ideologist of the modern ...” 2). Jameson is an unabashed apologist for Hegel, and his text is representative of the older view of Hegel vs. the other Idealists, e.g.: “But it is also not a question of following in Fichte’s footsteps and affirming that objective reality—the *noumenon*, which has now become the not-I—is summoned into being by the act of the I, which ‘posits’ it (now using the term in a metaphysical sense),” 29, which is opposite to the one proffered here.

⁶ As Gianni Vattimo has argued in *Art’s Claim to Truth*:

But even above and beyond the philosophical currents that explicitly acknowledge their links to Hegel, the presence of a dominant Hegelian mindset seems testified to by the personal itinerary of philosophers like Sartre... or by the ideal of knowledge as demythologized explanation that is largely dominant in our culture, criticism, and journalism, even where any explicit reference to the totality of the historical process that is constitutive of dialect is recognized as a problem. 17

⁷ See Rafael Hüntelmann *Schellings Philosophie der Schöpfung*, 110et ff.

of this empty self-identity of its own. The negative characteristic which this abstract identity receives as an object is also enumerated among the categories of Kant, and is no less familiar than the empty identity aforesaid. *Hence one can only read with surprise the perpetual remark that we do not know the Thing-in-itself. On the contrary, there is nothing we can know so easily.*⁸

Hegel's position is that it is foolish to posit as separate from us, and as unknowable, the very "thing-in-itself" we are positing and therefore know. Just as the pure apperception of the transcendental "I" is not my "I" but, rather, the absolute of thought, the absolute, in turn, is nothing other than this same positing of the transcendental "I" that is the necessary other of all finite objectivity:

The absolute is therefore a process in which everything finite reveals its finitude by its self-cancellation, but thereby necessarily leads to the infinite as the inherent "Other of itself." ... The success of the [Hegelian] enterprise depends upon articulating the knowledge that what appears finite is actually infinite, because we can know its finitude in philosophy, and thus transcend finitude within thought.⁹

"The absolute," Hegel adds with a mocking tone that marks many of his comments about Kant, Fichte and Schelling, "is, as it were, so kind as to leave individual things to their own enjoyment, and it again drives them back to the absolute unity" (69–70). With this additional comment, Hegel reiterates his position that the real absolute is found "easily" in our thinking of things and not in the things themselves or the "thing-in-itself," which is "so kind" as to happily leave things alone. In the words of Žižek:

What is crucial for the impasse of reflection is this very oscillation of the locus of its unrecuperable kernel between the In-itself which precedes reflective activity and the reflective activity itself—and the Hegelian 'trick,' of course, consists in resolving the deadlock by simply assuming the identity of these two irreducible kernels.¹⁰

The previous notion of an absolute that is separate from us is gone, replaced by an absolute that is "for us."¹¹ As Errol Harris notes: "for Hegel the Absolute is

⁸ Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Part I*, 72.

⁹ Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 129.

¹⁰ *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, 51.

¹¹ Numerous commentators have noted Hegel's rejection of an effable absolute in favor of something rational. See, for example, Paul Franks (*All or Nothing*, 376–7), where "the first principle [which] achieves adequate expression only through its dialectical articulation in the system," and Mark Kipperman, *Beyond Enchantment*: "For Hegel—who directly opposed Fichte on this point—the

an ‘infinite restlessness’ perpetually differentiating and specifying its organizing principle, the Concept, in avatars of dialectical forms constituting Nature and Spirit.”¹² Or, to put it differently yet again, Hegel’s famous “negation of negation” is not, nor ever can be, the elimination of negation: “The Spinozistic determination of infinity,” wrote Hegel in the *Lectures on Logic*,¹³ “by which infinity is the unlimited affirmation of any matter, is one-sided, since it does not include infinity as negation of the negation. The true infinite is that which remains identical with itself through mediation.”

The problem with Hegel’s “Easy A” is that it defines the absolute as rational thought rather than, as Kant and the other Idealists discussed here saw it, as that which must exist outside itself and thus outside any such rational thinking. As Andrew Bowie notes in comparing the Hegelian absolute to Schelling’s: “the real process [of the absolute] cannot be described in philosophy because the cognitive ground of knowledge and the real ground, though inseparable from each other, cannot be shown to reflect each other” (137). Summarizing his analysis of writings by Henrich and Frank on this subject Bowie concludes:

There is, then, a difference between being’s necessary dependence on essence for it to be known and essence’s dependence on being for it to be: this is the distinction between cognitive and real ground ... Hegel tries to merge the two. He does so by assuming that one side of a relation, essence, can show its identity with the other side. (171)

Jean-Yves Lacoste’s rebuke of Hegel’s emphasis—indeed, dependence—on the rational “concept” when dealing with religion is directly relevant to the same problem with Hegel’s rational understanding of the absolute:

In Hegel, access to the concept marks the end of the journey of consciousness. Conceptual knowledge not only judges (and condemns) any appeal to the ambiguous immediacy of *Gefühl*, but also clearly and distinctly arrives at a meaning that religious “representations” actually leave unthought, thus presenting itself as the last word on the matter, as intranscendable ... There are

“rift” in consciousness between finite and infinite can be healed by consciousness alone” (72). See also: “Thought and metaphysics: Hegel’s critical reception of Spinoza,” in *Spinoza and German Idealism*.

¹² *The Substance of Spinoza*, 197.

¹³ Quoted by Yitzhak Melamed in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, 181.

arguments afforded by liturgy that nevertheless permit, or rather oblige, us to reject the theory.¹⁴

As Schelling similarly maintains in direct response to Hegel's rational absolute, the absolute "must go through everything and remain in nothing. For if it remained anywhere, life and development would be hindered. To go through everything and to be nothing, namely not to be anything such that it could not also be otherwise—this is the demand."¹⁵ *Although such arguments may appear unrelated to art, it is in insisting upon an "easy absolute" that is synonymous with thought itself that Hegel is forced to deny the value of art in expressing an absolute that "must go through everything and remain in nothing."*

Hegel calls "subjective idealism" the position of Kant and others that would separate thought from things themselves and thereby create what is for him the nonsensical notion of an absolute "thing-in-itself." Categories such as causality, for example, are wrongly ascribed by Kant to thought as separate from things rather than as syntheses of subject and object (one might call Hegel's position, then, "objective idealism" or, in his words, "absolute idealism"):

That unity of self-consciousness, however, Kant called transcendental only; and he meant thereby that the unity was only in our minds and did not attach to the objects apart from our knowledge of them. To regard the categories as subjective only, i.e. as a part of ourselves, must seem very odd to the natural mind, and no doubt there is something queer about it ... Still, though the categories, such as unity, or cause and effect, are strictly the property of thought, it by no means follows that they must be ours merely and not also characteristics of the objects. Kant however confines them to the subject-mind, and his philosophy may be styled subjective idealism. (70)

Causality, Hegel argues, means nothing, but for the content which informs a particular causal relationship: "The main point is not *that* they are but *what* they are ... Laying aside therefore as unimportant this distinction between subjective and objective, we are chiefly interested in knowing what a thing is: i.e. its content, which is no more objective than it is subjective" (70–1). Similarly, Hegel's position with regard to the absolute is that as a category it is meaningless unless it is combined with the objectivity of an "absolute idealism." Put differently: the supersensible, which is for Kant the idea of what is "beyond the

¹⁴ *Experience and the Absolute*, 182.

¹⁵ Schelling, *On the Nature of Philosophy as a Science* (1820–1), quoted by Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 130.

sensible” as its underlying metaphysical cause, is for Hegel the absolute Idea insofar as it is concretely manifested in reality, which reality is for Hegel, of course, always the product of dialectical thinking, or thought. As Bowie notes with regard to Schelling’s (and Kant’s) absolute: “There is here no dialectical relationship of the absolute and the finite world, of the kind expressed in the [Hegelian] idea that the finite world, as nature, is the Other of *Geist*.”¹⁶

It might seem, comparing these two positions, that it is Hegel’s which is more conducive to the notion of an aesthetic absolute, or “art as the absolute,” while the Kantian supersensible that is separate from anything real or concrete would thereby lack even the possibility of a “sensible appearance of the Idea”—Hegel’s formula for art. And, in support of this suspicion, there is the obvious, objective fact that while Hegel’s voluminous, comprehensive *Lectures* adduce a myriad of concrete examples from the entire history of art, Kant’s third *Critique* seems to perform this very separation from anything real or concrete which Hegel complains about by failing to include anything but a few passing references to particular works of art. However, careful consideration of Hegel’s critique of Kant’s *Critiques* will reveal that this very insistence on exemplification and reification in Hegel’s notion of the absolute in general and the aesthetic absolute in particular is precisely what limits his understanding of an aesthetic reality which, as Kant had earlier argued and Fichte and Schelling had also maintained, has nothing to do with reality, even the objective reality of its own exemplifications.

Hegel distinguishes his own “absolute idealism” from the earlier “subjective idealism” of Kant et al. in #45 of Hegel’s critique of “Critical Idealism” in *Encyclopaedia I*:

According to Kant, the things that we know about are to us appearances only, and we can never know their essential nature, which belongs to another world we cannot approach. Plain minds have not unreasonably taken exception to this subjective idealism, with its reduction of the facts of consciousness to a purely personal world, created by ourselves alone. For the true statement of the case is rather as follows. The things of which we have direct consciousness are mere phenomena, not for us only, but in their own nature; and the true and proper case of these things, finite as they are, is to have their existence founded not in themselves but in the universal divine Idea. This view of things, it is true, is as idealist as Kant’s; but in contradistinction to the subjective idealism of the

¹⁶ Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 89.

Critical philosophy should be termed absolute idealism. Absolute idealism, however, though it is far in advance of vulgar realism, is by no means merely restricted to philosophy. It lies at the root of all religion; for religion too believes the actual world we see, the sum total of existence, to be created and governed by God. (73)

Hegel began this section (#45, 72) with the statement that “Reason is the faculty of the Unconditioned,” and then proceeded to chide Kant for his “mistake” in separating Reason from Understanding (*Vernunft* from *Verstand*), for the phenomenal particulars of empirical reality are actually also unconditioned in their interconnectedness: “The interdependence of one [object of knowledge] upon another is reckoned something foreign to them and to their true nature. The very opposite is the truth ...” (73). Whereas Kant “degrades Reason to a finite and conditioned thing” by “limiting the unconditioned of Reason to an abstract self-sameness without any shade of distinction,” thinking for Hegel is the absolute in its dialectical movement from one thing to another in their necessary, “divine” interconnectedness. Unlike Kant’s “subjective Idealism,” in Hegel’s “absolute idealism” the “unconditioned”—for example, God—unites all those seemingly separate but ultimately interconnected things all together.¹⁷ While Hegel praises Kant for his advance over the earlier empiricists who had failed to acknowledge the difference between the conditioned knowledge of the objects of understanding and the unconditioned reason which informs such knowledge (“Kant did valuable service when he enforced the finite character of the cognition of the understanding founded merely upon experience ... in the same way Kant restored the Idea to its proper dignity, vindicating it for Reason”), he nonetheless insists that, in failing to unite Reason with Understanding, Kant has left the absolute “out in the cold,” as it were, as the “*caput mortuum*” of deathly negativity: “But as respects the Idea he never got beyond its negative aspect, as what ought to be but is not.”

One might well wonder whether the famous “ought” of Reason’s freedom is really as negative as Hegel implies, and whether Hegel’s stricture here, which refers to Kant’s first *Critique*, applies to the third, where Reason and Understanding *are* united in the work of art. But, before turning our attention to Hegel’s subsequent comments on these Critiques, let us conclude this part of

¹⁷ As Dieter Henrich argues, this unity-in-difference (which can go by different names, such as “love”) is the essence of Hegelian thought:

So love is both a structure of complete self-reference, owing to its autonomy, and the principle of the relationship between one determinate finite being and its ‘other.’ (*Between Kant and Hegel*, 314)

Hegel's discussion of "The Critical Philosophy" by noting, again, that the major difference between Hegel's "absolute" and Kant's "subjective" Idealism is that Kant separates the absolute from human understanding (not, however, from human reason) whereas, for Hegel, it is its very essence—"there is nothing we can know so easily." Simply put: for Kant the absolute is absolutely separate from us, whereas, for Hegel, it is present to us at every moment as the very condition of ourselves, and of our thinking. As Nancy writes in his book on Hegel: "l'égaleité absolue de l'absolu—, est l'élément du sens,"¹⁸ or, loosely translated: 'the absolute absolute is the very condition of meaning,' which leads Hegel to define the absolute not as something separate from us, but, indeed, *as us*: "L'absolu est entre nous."¹⁹

Hegel provides another example of the critical difference between his notion of the absolute and Kant's when discussing proofs of God's existence in Kant's second *Critique*. There he argues that Jacobi's criticism that such proofs are contradictory in referring to something outside their realm of reference applies to Kant's notion of "reflective judgments" (the aesthetic judgments of the third *Critique* which, as opposed to determining the referent, are "determined" by it and, hence, merely "reflective"): "Jacobi, however, failed to recognize the genuine nature of essential thought—by which it cancels the mediation in the very act of mediating; and consequently his objection, *though it tells against the merely 'reflective' understanding*, is false when applied to thought as a whole, and in particular to reasonable thought" (82, emphasis mine). "Genuine thought," by which Hegel means his own dialectical thinking, is itself the very proof of God's existence as "Spirit" (compare Hegel's earlier references to thinking as "divine"), whereas Kant, in "mistakenly" separating thought from the very things (or, things-in-themselves) which it thinks, also separates thought from the essential "thing-in-itself" which is God. Kant's God, versus Hegel's, which is to say Kant's absolute, versus Hegel's, is thus nothing more than an empty idea of itself, a mere $A = A$ ("Kant expressly explains that the action of reason consists solely in applying the categories to systematize the matter given by perception, i.e. to place it in an outside order, under the guidance of the principle of non-contradiction," 86), whereas Hegel's God is found—dialectically, of course—in all the objects of his creation.

As one might expect, Hegel is more kindly disposed towards Kant when he

¹⁸ Hegel: *L'inquiétude du négatif*, 99.

¹⁹ Idem, 117.

turns his attention, at the end of this section on “The Critical Philosophy,” to the third *Critique*, where “Experience presents universalized particulars in the products of Art and of organic nature” (88). Although Kant still maintains the dreaded (for Hegel) distinction between thought and its referential reality:

Yet if thought will not think the ideal realized, the senses and the intuition can at any rate *see* it in the present reality of living organisms and of the beautiful in Art ... Such an Idea evidently radically transforms the relation which the understanding institutes between means and ends, between subjectivity and objectivity. And yet ... (89)

“And yet”: Hegel goes on to reject Kant’s designation of the faculty of judgment on the grounds that it is merely intuitive, experiential and personal, manifested as it is in Kant by things which are not really knowable such as genius and “aesthetic ideas.” Kant’s famous footnote to #49 of the third *Critique*, “The Faculties of the Mind which Constitute Genius,” in which Kant refers to the figure of Isis as “the most sublime image,” serves as a perfect example of what Hegel dislikes about Kant’s theory of tropes, or “aesthetic ideas.” Although Kant’s (and Schiller’s) use of the trope is only tenuously connected to the original figure of Isis, it is nonetheless characteristic of Egyptian art, as Hegel describes it as being about an absolute supersensible (the “All” in Schiller’s poem about Isis) that can never be known, that is always veiled by everything but the empty idea of itself. And, whereas Kant’s enthusiasm for this figure is unbounded, Hegel sees this same figure, and the entire notion of “aesthetic ideas” which it represents, as gravely mistaken in denying the objectivity, and knowability, of the absolute.

This would be the place, then, to end our discussion of the absolute in *Encyclopaedia I* and to turn our attention to the Introduction to *Hegel’s Lectures on Fine Art* and, later, his discussion of art at the end of *Encyclopaedia III*. As we shall see, Hegel’s rejection of an absolute that is obfuscated by any gap or lack of knowledge (“there is nothing we can know more easily”) leads to his view of all art—even classical art—as “a thing of the past.” The consequences of this devaluation, I would argue, are every bit as pernicious as Plato’s because, while Plato (as we saw in our introductory discussion of the *Symposium*) condemned art *per se* but nonetheless, in Diotima’s speech, described the absolute in distinctly aesthetic terms, Hegel acknowledges the value of art while, at the same time, deriding its philosophical significance.

Lectures on Fine Art. For Hegel, even more than for Kant, art’s *raison*

d'être is its expression of the absolute, but, unlike Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer, Hegel viewed art as an inadequate representation of this same absolute due to art's being veiled as only the "*sinnliche Erscheinung der Idee*," the "sensible appearance of the Idea," whereby "the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit."²⁰ Hegel's rejection of art in general is thus already determined by his rejection of the "symbolic," or first of three stages of art in which art is weighed down, as it were, by its material embodiment (e.g. the pyramids of Giza), a material embodiment which may be attenuated in the latter two stages but is never superseded. If Hegel is wrong, then, about his subordination of the primary "symbolic" stage of art, then he is wrong about his elevation of the secondary "classical" stage, wrong about subordination of the final "modern" stage of art, and, finally, wrong about his ultimate rejection of art in general.

Hegel's rejection of the sensible component in art is related to his rejection of "bad infinity," i.e. the idea of infinity as separate from the finite vs. encompassing the finite, as infinity must if it is infinite. This is obviously part of the emphasis just discussed on thought as the infinite, dialectical movement beyond itself even as it is asserting itself. Hegel's rejection of an infinity that is separate from the finite is part and parcel of his rejection of an absolute that is separate from our knowledge and (as we have seen), the major reason for his rejection of Kant and Critical Idealism in general. And even though one is tempted to defend art against the charge of "bad infinity" given the fact that art *does* represent the infinite in the finite, Hegel would still insist that art maintains the separation between the finite and the infinite by maintaining the separation between the Idea that is never fully sensible and the sensible that is never fully ideal.

Hegel's model of the philosophical truth, and "good infinity," is thus thought and, more properly, language, and, more properly still, "proper," literal language, which Hegel viewed as the triumph over poetic language in being separate from its material, sensible component: "Aux yeux de Hegel, le discours philosophique aurait pour tâche de se soustraire à l'image de la Chose à toute figure ... Toujours est-il que c'est bien la poésie en general ... qu'il s'agit de dépasser selon la nécessité du rationnel et du système, du concept et du sens."²¹ ("In Hegel's eyes, it is the goal of philosophy to remove the image of the Thing in every figure ... It is always poetry in general that one must surpass according to the necessity

²⁰ *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, xxxii.

²¹ *Versus: Hegel et la philosophie à l'épreuve de la poésie*, 14.

of the rational and of the system, of the concept and of sense.”) In other words, Hegel deems the “sign” function of language in which the signifier is arbitrary and irrelevant as superior to the “symbol” function of language in which, as in poetry, sound is still relevant. While it would certainly be possible—and relatively easy—to debate whether the literal is really superior to the figures and tropes such as metaphor (philosophers from Nietzsche and I. A. Richards through Heidegger and Derrida have suggested otherwise), we will instead consider the related but more focused question of whether the “sensible appearance of the Idea,” which is synonymous with the *aesthetic appearance of the absolute*, is really to be deemed inferior to the more “philosophical” understanding of the infinite/absolute, as Hegel insists.

Although Hegel argues for the higher value of literal over figurative language, he is not a nominalist, positivist, empiricist or even a literalist insofar as he identifies *Geist*, “Spirit,” and the related absolute with the movement of language beyond itself. It is this dialectical movement, which incorporates the material in a higher understanding of itself, that leads him to abandon art as the inchoate “sensible appearance of the Ideal” as opposed to his own superior philosophical treatise about the sensible appearance of the Ideal. Just as the sound of language disappears in lieu of its meaning, the works of art in Hegel’s treatise disappear in lieu of his philosophical discussion of them. For it is not just the sound, but also the individual meaning of words and works that disappear into the dialectical vortex of Hegelian thought which leaves behind nothing particular that is not absorbed into a higher truth than itself. “I,” to use one of Hegel’s examples, disappear the moment I realize that the supposedly real, material person speaking really and materially is a function of a rational, philosophical, linguistic system that has nothing to do with the “I” who is speaking: “I cannot say ‘I.’”²²

As André Hirt has noted, Hegel joins Plato as one of “the greatest enemies of art and the greatest artists of philosophy,”²³ for Hegel’s dialectical absolute, while supposedly rejecting art in lieu of philosophy, is nothing other than the very truth of art as that which is always beyond itself in denying the very sensibleness which is itself denied in the “sensible appearance of the idea.” If the truth of *Geist* is the realization of the truth of language as that which exists outside itself, then the rejection of art as trapped in its material, sensible

²² See Paul de Man’s discussion of this quotation from Hegel in *Sign and Symbol in Hegel’s Aesthetics*.

²³ André Hirt, *Versus: Hegel et la philosophie à l’épreuve de la poésie*, 15.

figuration is only valid if one were to really believe in the literal truth of art, something which is not nor ever has been the literal truth of art. And, just as no one would ever think of replacing even one of the individual works of art which Hegel discusses in the *Vorlesungen* with Hegel's discussion of same, it is in the individual, material works of art that one finds the *Geist* or Spirit of the absolute which Hegel is after.²⁴

For all of the discussion surrounding Hegel's famous pronouncements of the "end of art" it is surprising that more has not been made of the way that Hegel's position reiterates not only Plato's view in Book X of *The Republic* but Plato's view in the *Symposium* (discussed in the Introduction to this book),²⁵ where Diotima similarly insisted that the ultimate goal of philosophy, absolute beauty in itself, cannot be found in any corporeal instantiation of beauty:

having his eyes fixed upon beauty in the widest sense, he may no longer be the slave of a base and mean-spirited devotion to an individual example of beauty. The man who has been guided thus far in the mysteries of love, and who has directed his thoughts towards examples of beauty in due and orderly succession, will suddenly have revealed to him as he approaches the end of his initiation a beauty whose nature is marvelous indeed, the final goal, Socrates, of all his previous efforts ... nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal ... (93–4)

Beauty which is separate from anything physical, the absolute "beauty of beauty," as it were, is indeed "a beauty whose nature is marvelous indeed." And, while Hegel does not, like Plato, deny the physical world as the absolute, it is never the physical world as such which Hegel sees as absolute but, rather, its dialectical reality as thought, and it is this dialectical synthesis of thought with reality in the absolute that Hegel sees as lacking in art. Thus Hegel's famous formula for art as the "sensible appearance of the Idea" must be heard, and understood, as

²⁴ This is especially true of Hegel's famous interpretation of the tragic "conflict of two rights" as epitomized by *Antigone*, which he considered the "masterpiece of the ancient world" (*Aesthetics*, vol. II, 1218). The play is ultimately *not* about the all-too rational conflict between Creon ("state") and Antigone ("religion," "family"), for, a) Creon clearly states that he would not prosecute Antigone if she were a man, and, b) Antigone, for her part, is motivated less by her devotion to her brother and his burial than by her own sense of entitlement.

²⁵ The comparison has not gone entirely unnoticed however. E.g. André Hirt, *Versus: Hegel et la philosophie à l'épreuve de la poésie*, 30.

non-dialectical, as the “*sensible* appearance of the Idea.” In this sense, Hegel’s view of art is not different from Plato’s, and it is not different from his own view of the “inferior” symbolic stage of art, whose works are “weighed down,” as it were, by the dross of earthly matter which they are straining to escape. As Eva Geulen notes, “Even the classical artwork, in which the identification of form and meaning was to have been achieved, has echoes of earlier phases and is buffeted by obscure recollections of symbolic ambiguity.”²⁶ Art, according to Hegel, can only attempt to represent the absolute in some ultimately misleading, mistaken way; it is in this sense a catachresis, or “misuse” in the negative sense of the term, as opposed to the more positive sense of catachresis initiated by Derrida in his re-reading of Aristotle’s discussion of same.²⁷ It is for this reason, I believe, that the notion of art as absolute has virtually disappeared from critical discourse. This neglect is somewhat surprising given the fact that the weakness of Hegel’s rational dialectic has been frequently noted, not to mention the fact that his famous notion of the “end of art” is patently false.

As we have seen, Hegel’s absolute is an “easy,” “matter-of-fact” absolute that is the necessary condition of the mind’s inherent relation to the “supersensible” world which must lie “beyond” appearances. Thinking, according to Hegel, is always thinking about the absolute insofar as it is necessarily separate from the object of perception and, as such, must consider said object not as said object but as the truth of said object. Such absolute thinking, as we have seen, is as simple as thought itself, but as remote as God itself insofar as being inherently separate from its own objectivity. Indeed, the concept of “God” is the ultimate example of that which is as simple as what lies before me and yet must always remain removed from any objective determination of itself. If one were to ask what God is, the answer for Hegel is as simple as the very notion of thought itself, a notion that, like the well-known paradox of language, can never be known because it is always already what is known.

Thus Hegel’s notion of the absolute has nothing in particular to do with the work of art, although Hegel’s notion of the work of art has everything to do with the absolute. Are we dealing, here, with two absolutes? That, given the nature of the absolute, is impossible, and so leads Hegel to conclude that the aesthetic absolute is no absolute at all. *It is precisely this difference between an aesthetic absolute and a philosophical absolute which, like the one described by Diotima*

²⁶ *The End of Art*, 34.

²⁷ “La mythologie blanche,” *Marges—de la philosophie*.

in the Symposium, is pure thinking, that will determine for Hegel the devalued nature of the aesthetic in its relation to the truth. A great deal depends, it would seem, on whether Hegel is correct regarding the truth of one or other of these two absolutes.

One might argue that Hegel avoided this “excluded middle” by assigning to art an intermediary position between an “absolute-less” empiricism and an “absolute-full” philosophy. But is it really possible for art to occupy this “middle position” between truth and appearances, the absolute and the merely empirical? Is it possible to be “a little absolute?” Hegel clearly thinks so, but he also clearly denies this middle when pressed to consider the absolute as it must truly exist in his own philosophy (this will be particularly evident when we consider, in the final section of this chapter, Hegel’s “final word” on art at the end of *Encyclopaedia III*). Given this indecisiveness, it might turn out to be the case that Hegel’s famous formulation of the “end of art” can be heard as referring not to the demise of art but as a teleological reference to an aesthetic absolute that occupies the end position, and not the middle—the end, in other words, not of art, but of (Platonic) philosophy.

Hegel acknowledges at the outset that his work about the history of art is not to be confused with “art history,” for the latter does not proceed philosophically and, most importantly, it does not raise the fundamental question of its own subject, namely, “what is beauty?”:

There is an essential distinction between this [the scholarship of the history of art] and the opposite aspect, the wholly theoretical reflection, which made an effort to understand beauty as such out of itself alone, and to get to the bottom of its idea ... Now, if the beautiful is in fact to be known according to its essence and conception, this is only possible by help of the thinking idea, by means of which the logico-metaphysical nature of the Idea as such, as also that of the particular Idea of the beautiful enters into the thinking consciousness ... Thus it is, no doubt, the case that we, too, in modern times, must in our philosophy of art start from the idea of the beautiful ... (25)

It is easy enough, and necessary according to Hegel, to exemplify the notion of beauty with any of the countless examples of artistic beauty from all times and cultures. It is also easy enough to give characteristics of the beautiful (e.g. Aristotle’s notion of perfection) that do not, however, claim to know what beauty itself really is. This is of course the essential question of art, and of art’s relation to the absolute, but while Hegel raises this essential question about

the meaning of beauty—a question all too often left unquestioned, let alone unanswered—he avoids answering the question more egregiously than those historians and philosophers who do not even raise the question:

If we are to display the necessity of our object, the beautiful in art, we should have to prove that art or beauty was a result of antecedents such as, when considered in their true conception, to lead us on with scientific necessity to the idea of fine art. But in as far as we begin with art, and propose to treat of the essence of its idea and of the realization of that idea, not of antecedents which go before it as demanded by its idea, so far art, as a peculiar scientific object, has, for, a presupposition which lies beyond our consideration ... Therefore it is not our present aim to demonstrate the idea of beauty from which we set out, that is, to derive it according to its necessity from the presuppositions which are its antecedents in science. This task belongs to an encyclopaedic development of philosophy as a whole and of its particular branches. For us, the idea of beauty and of art is a presupposition given in the system of philosophy. (29)

One recognizes the familiar academic gesture here of deferring a question to another time or place, which time or place (in this case, Hegel's final volume of the *Encyclopaedia*, to be discussed in the final section of this chapter) will not, in fact, answer the question. Indeed, one would be naive to think that, if Hegel had an answer to the question "What is beauty?" he would not provide it here, in his own *Aesthetics*. But this gesture of infinite deferral has particular significance for our own consideration of Hegel's ambivalence towards art and, more specifically, his disavowal of the absolute essence of art. The fact that Hegel raises but cannot answer the question "What is beauty?" is a direct result of what we have just described as a philosophical notion of the absolute that has nothing to do with beauty—Hegel's reference in the passage just quoted to the problem of beauty being a question that can only be answered "scientifically" and/or philosophically in other, non-aesthetic works makes this clear. In other words, Hegel has clarified for us why it is that his notion of the aesthetic absolute is not aesthetic at all, and, with that, clarified for us the reason that the aesthetic absolute has disappeared from a history of critical thinking about art that has deferred to his deferral rather than to the very different views of the aesthetic absolute found in Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer and, later, Heidegger.

Neither Kant, nor the others just mentioned, can answer the question "What is beauty?" either. But is this a failing on Kant's part, when Hegel, as just argued, only raises the question to then dismiss its relevance to anything but philosophy,

where it is not answered either? Kant does not ask the question “What is beauty?” because he knows better—he knows, that is, that beauty, exactly like the absolute, is always separate from itself, *always separate from the very thing that is beautiful*. And with that we understand the importance of Hegel’s raising a fundamental question about art that he supposedly knows the answer to but cannot answer: this “Oedipal” gesture (Hegel believes that Oedipus triumphantly solves the riddle of the sphinx!²⁸) is to be understood as symptomatic of a rational, logical, philosophical, scientific approach to art and the aesthetic absolute that fails to understand an absolute that is always separate from itself, and separate from the very question whose enigmatic unanswerability is not a failing, but an answer.

It is not surprising, then, that the most “unanswerable” stage of art—the “symbolic”—is deemed by Hegel to be the least successful. As we have noted before, this most primitive stage of art might easily be deemed the *most* aesthetically successful given the fact that all art—all three stages of the “symbolic,” “classical” and “romantic”—stand in relation to philosophy, the true absolute according to Hegel, as the symbolic stage stands in relation to the other two, more rational periods of aesthetic production. There is much, of course, that may be debated about these so-called stages, but for our purposes we will focus on the implications of this analogy (sc. symbolic: classical: art: philosophy). And, since this question also concerns the relation of art to religion (the symbolic stage being the most overtly religious of the three), we will pursue this question, after discussing the *Vorlesungen*, into the final section of the final volume of the *Encyclopaedia*, where Hegel’s discussion of art is placed in the context of both religion and philosophy.

The analogy in which the symbolic stage of art is most representative of art in general creates an obvious problem for Hegel, and his aesthetics in general. That is: if all art is “spiritual being in concrete shape, the Ideal, or more closely looked at, the absolute mind, and truth [in] itself” (89), why are “Chinese, Egyptian” art incapable of “genuine beauty” (80–1)? Surely the great pyramids of Egypt, for example, would represent “spiritual being in concrete shape”²⁹? Although Hegel does not refer here to what had by then become a commonplace distinction,

²⁸ *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, 83–4.

²⁹ Indeed, Hegel refers to the great pyramids of Giza as “the simple prototype of fine art,” but, as “prototype,” he goes on to deny the pyramids the status of real art:

Consequently the embodiment for such an Inward still remains in relation to the determinacy of the same’s content quite as much a wholly external form and envelopment. Such an external environment, *in which an Inward reposes under a veil*, are the pyramids. (*The Philosophy of Fine Art*, 77–8, emphasis mine)

namely, that between beauty and sublimity, perhaps that dubious distinction is precisely what Hegel does mean here. The idea that symbolic art lacks “genuine beauty” but not “genuine art” only makes sense if one understands such “genuine beauty” as the more proportional “infinite within the finite” as opposed to the less proportional “finite within the infinite” described by Burke, Kant, and other writers on the sublime. The problem for Hegel’s aesthetics, then, can be restated thus: the *general* formula for art as “the sensible appearance of the Idea” is actually not the formula for “genuine art,” because said formula applies to all art including the beautiful and the sublime, whereas Hegel really only considers beauty as “genuine art.”

Proceeding in this way we are led to reconsider Hegel’s oft-repeated complaint that the symbolic is a “mere search after plastic portrayal” (82) and, moreover, “mute” in relation to such “plasticity” (86). As we saw in our earlier discussion of the *Encyclopaedia*, the “search” for the absolute, according to Hegel, is over. The absolute has been found and, moreover, it speaks in language itself, language which is itself the medium of the absolute in synthesizing, through Spirit, the reality of things with their thought. The absolute, according to Hegel, speaks, and not metaphorically either, because figurative, enigmatic messages such as that of the sphinx and, indeed, the sphinx her/itself, are ultimately part of the symbolic “muteness” and search for meaning that Hegel everywhere decries:

The works of Egyptian art in their excessively mysterious symbolism are therefore riddles ... and we may summarily define the Sphinx as symbol of the real significance of the genius of Egypt. It stands as a symbol for symbolism itself ... Out of the obtuse strength and robustness of animality the spirit of man is fain to press forward, albeit still unable to attain the perfect representation of his own freedom ... This straining after self-conscious spirituality, which fails to grasp itself from the truth of its own substance in a form of external reality which is alone adequate to express it ... is, in its general terms, the symbolical; and we find it here concentrated to a point as the riddle.

It is in this sense that the Sphinx in the Greek *mythos*, which itself again is open to symbolic interpretation, appears as the monster which propounds its riddle ... Oedipus discovered the simple answer that it was man himself, and hurled the sphinx from the rocks ... The light of consciousness is that clarity, which suffers its concrete content to shine all luminous through the form which

is wholly adapted to unfold it, and in its positive form of existence simply reveal that which it is in truth.³⁰

Hegel's implicit preference for the more rational "classical" over the "symbolic" epitomized, first, by Egyptian art in general and, second, by the Oedipal sphinx (no matter that we have thereby moved from one culture to another, a gesture that should be interpreted in its own right as the denial of the denial of the symbolic) should not confuse us into thinking that he is thus merely stating his preference for one type of art over the other, for this preference is part and parcel of his overall preference for the clearly delineated—sc. the literal—over a "mute" realm of figuration that never says what it means but always means what it says. Hegel wants "to have his absolute and eat it too," that is, he wants an aesthetic that renders the absolute or divine as clearly delimited—Zeus as opposed to the Sphinx—but which thereby eschews anything sublime or figurative—i.e. itself. The problem is that in separating the symbolic from the classical, beauty from sublimity, and the literal from the figurative, Hegel is separating art from itself, and from its identification with the absolute, an absolute that, as Kant had earlier argued, can never be represented otherwise than through veiled, sublime works of art and figurative, "aesthetic ideas." To say that the Greek gods are beautiful as opposed to sublime is to ignore their many terrifying aspects; to say that beauty is ever "clearly delineated" is not only to ignore the ultimate unity of the beautiful with the sublime (as Schelling rightly states, "there is actually no true objective opposition between beauty and sublimity; the truly and absolutely beautiful is invariably also sublime and the sublime is beautiful as well"³¹) but to ignore beauty itself, which is *never* clearly delineated. To say that symbolic art is inferior because "mute" is to ignore the obvious fact that all art is mute in never saying, literally, what it means. And, finally, to say that symbolic art "searches for" an absolute that classical art has already "found" is to ignore the fact that while the absolute is indeed, as Hegel claimed, human, that does not mean that it is to be found in the human form as opposed, to stay with Hegel's example, to that of the great pyramids of Giza. Indeed, the fact that Hegel privileges the human form as closer to the absolute should be seen as representative of his position of the absolute as distinctly human as opposed to absolute. Similarly, one could also argue that Hegel's frequent denunciation

³⁰ *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, 83–4 (emphasis mine).

³¹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 226.

of “fetishism” and “fetish-faith” is wrongly directed against the “sensibleness” of the fetish itself, without which there would be no art, or religion.³²

*Encyclopaedia III.*³³ Hegel’s notion of art’s relation to the absolute Idea is doomed from the outset by the philosopher’s insistence that art is inferior to the Idea it strives to express and, thus, not itself absolute. Even during the so-called classical stage of art, where the Idea and its sensible expression come closest to a perfect synthesis, the artwork is ultimately a catachrestic “mistake” that fails to render properly the divine figure of the god it purports to express. As Hegel states in Section Three of *Encyclopaedia III* on “absolute Mind” (which is itself divided into three sections on Art, Religion and Philosophy respectively):

The sensible externality attaching to the beautiful, the form of immediacy as such, at the same time qualifies what it embodies: *and the God (of art) has with his spirituality at the same time the stamp upon him of a natural medium or natural phase of existence*—He contains the so-called unity of nature and spirit—i.e. the immediate unity in sensibly intuitional form—hence not the spiritual unity, in which the natural would be put only as ‘ideal’, as superseded in spirit, and [where] the spiritual content would be only in self-relation. *It is not the absolute spirit which enters this consciousness.* (#557, 203, emphasis mine)

It is as if the work of art were marred by one of those “time stamps” that appear on digital photographs unless one remembers to remove them. Or, to use another metaphor, it is as if art were an apotropaea from which one must look away in order to see the repressed truth of that which cannot be seen. But, what if, as Kant had earlier maintained, art as “disinterested” “subjective universality” is never an object but, rather, that which cannot be seen *even when it is seen*? In that case, art would not be separate from the absolute as Hegel continues to define it, nor be that in which “[in] such single [artistic] shapes the absolute mind cannot be made explicit” (294) but, rather, that in which the absolute is fully, and not inadequately, rendered as the “sensible appearance of the Idea.”

The fact that, in Hegel’s view, the classical stage of art comes closest to being an adequate expression of the absolute is actually damning, because coming close to the absolute is itself an obvious impossibility unless one considers that closeness itself the absolute (cf. Fichte’s *hiatus irrationalis*³⁴). Everything, it

³² See Werner Hamacher, *Pleroma: Reading in Hegel*, 21–2 *et passim* Ch. 1, “Hors-d’oeuvre.”

³³ *Encyclopaedia* Part III, trans. A. V. Miller.

³⁴ “The gap [hiatus] which as a result of the absolute insight is in essence nothing at all, exists only in respect of the We ... The principle for the irrational gap as such, i.e. for the absolute absence of principle, as such, should be demonstrated.” *The Science of Knowing*, 123–4.

might be said, is close to the absolute. For this reason, Hegel's rejection of the symbolic stage of art, "in which the figuration (sc. figure) suitable to the Idea is not yet found" and is "a restless and unappeased effort which throws itself into shape after shape as it vainly tries to find its goal" (295), and his related rejection of the romantic stage of art, "where God is incapable of external manifestation because he is inward, subjective," is really tantamount to his not-so-obvious rejection of the classical stage of art, where the supposedly adequate rendering of the god (in Greek sculpture) is only adequate as the inadequate, artistic rendering of an absolute that can never, according to Hegel, be adequately rendered as such except in thought.

Hegel seems aware, at the end of the section on art in *Encyclopaedia III* and before the two subsequent sections on religion and philosophy (the progressive order is significant, for "Beautiful art has its future in true religion," 297), of the weakness of his position as we have described it, namely, that it assumes that the sensible element of art precludes an adequate rendering of the absolute absolute, as it were. For, there, he states:

Beautiful art ... has for its condition the self-consciousness of the free spirit—the consciousness that compared with it the natural and sensible *has no standing of its own*; it makes the natural wholly into the mere expression of spirit, which is thus the inner form that gives utterance to itself alone. (297, emphasis mine)

Hegel's devalorization of art is evident here and in his subsequent statement that "even fine art is only a grade of liberation, not the supreme liberation itself":

The genuine objectivity, which is only in the medium of thought—the medium in which alone the pure spirit is for the spirit, and where the liberation is accompanied with reverence—is still absent in the sensible beauty of the work of art, still more in that external, unbeautiful sensibleness. (297)

Hegel is referring, at the end of this important definition of "pure spirit" as thought, to the symbolic stage of art which, as we have argued, is not really separate from the other two stages. Small wonder, then, that Hegel has succeeded in rendering art impotent as an expression of the absolute, not by denying its inherent value as such, but, perhaps more damningly, by acknowledging its link to the absolute only to deny it.

This ingenious denigration is also evident in the way that what we are calling the "aesthetic absolute" is more amply described in the two sections on religion and philosophy which follow the discussion of art in this concluding section of

Encyclopaedia III on “absolute Mind.” Indeed, the entire problem with Hegel’s view of the relationship between “art and the absolute” is precisely this: that for Hegel the “true absolute” is only to be found in the “pure thinking” of the absolute by religion and philosophy. And yet, what if this denial of the “aesthetic absolute” in lieu of pure thought turned out, as demonstrated in our earlier discussion of Diotima’s similar argument, to be the epitome of the aesthetic absolute? *What if, in other words, the way one thinks about the work of art in philosophy and religion turned out to be the very model of an absolute that can never be known as such, that is always “beyond beyond” and so at one with its sensible manifestation?*

In the section on “Religion” Hegel ridicules those who would assert that one cannot “ascertain god,” which is the very nature of Mind:

But clearly if the word “Mind” (*Geist*) is to have a meaning, it implies the revelation of Him ... God is God only so far as he knows himself; his self-knowledge is, further, a self-consciousness in man and man’s knowledge of God, which proceeds to man’s self-knowledge in God. (298)

Again we see how, for Hegel, the problem with previous notions of God is that they rely on a false separation between the mind or spirit and the absolute whereas, in truth, God or the absolute is to be “easily” found in the thinking of God and the absolute, with no separation whatsoever. Indeed, one could argue that Hegel’s rejection of the necessary “*sinnliche*” component of art is just a function of Hegel’s rejection of anything that separates thinking from itself. But, are religion and philosophy really the only options because, unlike art, they have proceeded beyond the worship of false idols to the realization of the truth of worship itself? If, according to Nietzsche, Christianity is merely “Platonism for the masses,” what would he think of this particularly Protestant version of Platonism in which “God is, in point of content, the essential and actual spirit of nature and spirit *when the immediacy and sensibleness of shape and knowledge is superseded*”? (299, emphasis mine)

In Hegel’s view of religion there is an “infinite return” of God in all the things of this world without, however, his being in any one of them: “[absolute spirit exhibits itself] as infinite return, and reconciliation with the eternal being, of the world it gave away—the withdrawal of the eternal from the phenomenal into the unity of its fullness” (299). Rather than sensible beauty in which, according to Schelling (and earlier, Spinoza), the infinite is found in the finite, here Hegel insists on a religion in which the finite dissolves into the infinite. This can only

occur in thought or spirit in which the material element vanishes, even as the Son of God vanishes as a material being:

Under the 'moment' of Universality—the sphere of pure thought or the abstract medium of essence—it is therefore the absolute spirit, which is at first the presupposed principle, not, however, staying aloof and inert, but (as underlying and essential power under the reflective category of causality) creator of heaven and earth: but yet in this eternal sphere rather only begetting himself as his son, with whom, though different, he still remains in original identity—just as, again, this differentiation of him from the universal essence eternally supersedes itself, and, through this mediating of a self-superseding mediation, the first substance is essentially as concrete individuality and subjectivity—is the Spirit. (299)

“This mediating of a self-superseding mediation” yields a concrete substance like subjectivity which, modeled on the body of Christ, is “transfigured” into something beyond itself while, at the same time, being that which is transfigured into something beyond itself. Such a privileging of spirit as always beyond itself leads Hegel, as it had Plato, beyond art as beyond any concrete manifestation while at the same time allowing for an “artistic solution” to this impasse in the form of art itself as just such a constantly “self-superseding mediation.” For Hegel the “artistic solution” is ultimately a failure and must yield first to religion and then to philosophy, both of which, in the name of the absolute, reject the sensible as such, whereas art, which also represents the absolute, is part of the “infinite return” of the absolute as something sensible, not as the absolute itself. But it is the unwillingness of Hegel to conceive of the absolute as a “critical double” which *denies itself as such*, sc. in which the sensible component denies itself as such, that leads to the “excluded middle” of a mistaken denigration of art as absolute.³⁵

As Schelling argued, because the very “sensible manifestation of the absolute” which Hegel decries as the only way that God or the absolute can ever manifest itself, and because, conversely, the purely rational God preferred by Hegel denies the existence of God by denying any sensible manifestation whatsoever, art is higher than either religion or philosophy as such, not lower. “God” for Hegel is the pure thinking or Idea of God itself which, like the purely mechanical

³⁵ Werner Hamacher, “The End of Art with the Mask,” in *Hegel after Derrida* makes a compelling case for reading Hegel’s famous declaration of the end of art this way when he states that: “The point is to think of both art and its end ... as a dispatch in which with art something other than art, something other as art, is promised and exposed” (130); although this generous reading runs counter to Hegel’s less generous views on art and related matters (e.g. Kant’s Critical Idealism).

language that Hegel prefers to its more figurative aspects,³⁶ denies its own material component. But God or the absolute for Plato and Hegel, in denying (or sublating) any link to the material, is not only a vacuous “thinking about thinking” but, moreover, the false idol of a “god without god”, that is no god at all, but merely the human desire to deny any separation—and unity—between the divine and the human.

Hegel defends his position on religion against the charge of pantheism (ever-present during this period in Germany) by insisting on this rejection of the merely finite:

It is only the picture—floating in the indefinite blue—of the world as one thing, the All, that could ever be considered capable of combining with God; only on that assumption could philosophy be supposed to teach that God is the world: for if the world were taken as it is, as everything, as the endless lot of empirical existence, then it would hardly have been even held possible to suppose a pantheism which asserted of such stuff that it is God. (308)

But then, having rejected any link between God and “the endless lot of empirical existence” in lieu of “the picture of the world as one thing, the All,” something extraordinary happens in this third and final section of the *Encyclopaedia*. Hegel cites as an example of this true, dialectical unity of spirit and matter, the “unity of the soul with the one,” the great thirteenth century Persian poet/mystic Jelalleddin-Rumi, from whose poetry he adds a long quotation—the longest such citation here or in the voluminous *Lectures on Aesthetics*:

I saw but One through all heaven's starry spaces gleaming:
 I saw but One in all sea billows wildly streaming.
 I looked into the heart, a waste of worlds, a sea, —
 I saw a thousand dreams, —yet One amidst all dreaming.
 And earth, air, water, fire, when thy decree is given,
 Are molten into One: against thee none hath striven.
 There is no living heart but beats unfailingly
 In the one song of praise to thee, from earth and heaven ...

I'll tell thee how from out the dust God moulded man, —
 Because the breath of Love He breathed into his clay:
 I'll tell thee why the spheres their whirling paths began,
 They mirror to God's throne Love's glory day by day:

³⁶ See the discussion of Hegel's view of language in Paul de Man's *Sign and Symbol in Hegel's Aesthetics*.

I'll tell thee why the morning winds blow o'er the grove,
 It is to bid Love's roses bloom abundantly:
 I'll tell thee why the night broods deep the earth above,
 Love's bridal tent to deck with sacred canopy:
 All riddles of the earth dost thou desire to prove?
 To every earthly riddle is Love alone the key.

(308–10; Hegel's citation has been excerpted here)

What, one may well wonder, has happened to Hegel's devalorization of art, and especially symbolic, "mystical" art? Although Hegel adds to his effusive praise of the Sufi mystic the expected caveat that "[the] fault of all these modes of thought and systems is that they stop short of defining substance as subject and as mind" (310), is there really any difference between the poetic absolute as described by Rumi, and the "Spirit" as described by Hegel, especially given the fact that, as Hegel writes in the final page of *Encyclopaedia III*, "The eternal Idea, in full fruition of its essence, eternally sets itself to work, engenders and enjoys itself as absolute Mind" (315)? The "work" which "engenders and enjoys itself as absolute" is, precisely, the "work of art," and the desire expressed by Hegel to "define substance as subject and as mind" is merely the desire to deny a separation from the absolute that *is* the absolute. *Is/Is—Isis*: The veil of Isis—the ultimate symbol (according to Kant) of all symbolic art, is also the ultimate symbol of art's expression of the absolute as separate from itself, but present in this very separation.

Schopenhauer: *The World as Will and Representation*

*The poet, however, apprehends the Idea, the inner being of mankind outside all relation and all time, the adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself at its highest grade.*¹

The very year (1818) that Hegel was declaring his now famous declaration of “the end of art,” Schopenhauer published the first version of his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*). As might be expected from someone who despised all things Hegelian, Schopenhauer’s view of art, and of art’s relation to the absolute, is the opposite of his rival’s: where Hegel saw art as, at best, philosophy’s handmaiden, Schopenhauer viewed art as the highest form of philosophical truth, as the “pure knowing” (or, as we have seen, “intellectual intuition”) of things-in-themselves as opposed to their contingent, everyday realities.

In this final chapter we will focus on Book III (of four) of *The World as Will and Representation*, which is where Schopenhauer applies his notion of the will as the Kantian thing-in-itself (“what in the Kantian philosophy is called the thing-in-itself, and appears therein as so significant but obscure and paradoxical a doctrine, is, if reached by the entirely different path we have taken, nothing but the will”²) to art. Whereas Kant had first opened the door to art’s identification with the supersensible absolute, Kant’s successors, and especially Schopenhauer, have the artist/genius, and the “connoisseur” who follows him/her, walk right through it:

The possibility of such anticipation of the beautiful a priori in the artist as well as of its recognition a posteriori by the connoisseur, is to be found in the fact

¹ *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 245.

² *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, 170.

that artist and connoisseur are themselves the “in-itself” of nature, the will objectifying itself. (222, emphasis mine)³

As we shall see, what might appear to be the contradictory identification of the will and art, with the latter standing outside the will as its “representation,” is actually the key to understanding art’s metaphysical status as the only true expression of the absolute will. It is important, then, to prepare our discussion of the aesthetic absolute in Schopenhauer with attention to the philosophical apparatus that begins Book III and, in particular, to Schopenhauer’s redefinition of the Platonic Idea as synonymous with both art and the absolute. As Christopher Janaway notes, for Schopenhauer “aesthetic experience is a release from subjectivity and a route to the discovery of Platonic Ideas.”⁴ This “redefinition” of Plato’s Ideas returns us to the argument made in Chapter 1 of the present work, which had also, like Schopenhauer, argued against Plato’s so-called rejection of the aesthetic absolute.

*

There is one thing, at least, that Hegel and Schopenhauer agree on: both reject Kant’s rigid separation of the absolute from a certain form of consciousness and/or knowability:

In all we know, a certain something remains hidden from us as being quite unfathomable ... This mask enables us always merely to assume, never to know, what is hidden beneath it; and this something gleams through as an inscrutable mystery ... *we ourselves are the thing-in-itself. Consequently a way from within stands open to us to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate from without.* It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that could not be taken by attack from without.⁵ (emphasis mine)

For Hegel, as we saw in the preceding chapter, this criticism of the Kantian, unknowable absolute takes the form of an “easy absolute” in which the dialectical nature of thought itself is identified with the absolute “thing-in-itself.” For Schopenhauer, the absolute is not identified with dialectical reasoning—a

³ Quotations refer to Volume I unless otherwise noted.

⁴ *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator*, 27.

⁵ “On the Possibility of Knowing the Thing-in-Itself” *The World as Will*, vol. II, 194–7.

reasoning which, as we saw, denies art and the sensible—but with the sensible will, which conjoins objectivity with its own unknowable opposite, subjectivity:

It is merely an error of Kant that he did not reckon among these forms, before all others, that of being-object-for-a-subject; for this very form is the first and most universal of all phenomenon, i.e. of all representation. He should therefore have expressly denied being-object to his thing-in-itself, for this would have protected him from that great inconsistency which was soon discovered. (174–5)

In this respect, at least, the truth of Whitehead's famous statement regarding Plato's legacy is confirmed, for we note two very different reactions on the parts of Schopenhauer and Hegel to Plato's "Ideas." For Hegel, the Idea is the rational separation from things or even "things-in-themselves," whereas, for Schopenhauer, the Platonic Idea is the "intellectual intuition"⁶ of sensory things as they are perceived absolutely, both in themselves AND for us. Although Schopenhauer's view of Platonic Idealism would seemingly turn Plato's so-called Idealism, and his famous condemnation of art, on its head, he is adamant that his reading of the "Idea" is the correct one:

We may take this opportunity to mention yet another point in which our theory of Ideas differs widely from that of Plato. Thus he teaches (*Republic X*) that the object which art aims at expressing, the prototype of painting and poetry, is not the Idea, but the individual thing. The whole of our discussion so far maintains the very opposite, and Plato's opinion is the less likely to lead us astray, *as it is the source of one of the greatest and best known errors of that great man, namely of his disdain and rejection of art, especially of poetry.* (212, emphasis mine)

As we argued in Chapter 1, Diotima's speech in the *Symposium* can be read *à la* Schopenhauer in proffering a "beauty whose nature is marvelous indeed," the "intellectual intuition" of actually "seeing the absolute." Like Hegel, Schopenhauer, too, returns to Plato, but he does so not to repeat Plato's "error" regarding art and the absolute but to reclaim the Platonic Idea as the "intellectual intuition" of an object that is both seen AND "known" absolutely in the work of art.

Understanding Schopenhauer's use of the Platonic Idea to describe the aesthetic absolute must begin, then, by disabusing itself of the notion of an ideal form or "concept" which is supposedly separate from its particular reality

⁶ This important notion, which is addressed by Kant and the other Idealists, is discussed throughout this volume.

(a notion which was already rejected by Aristotle in his “third man” critique of the Idea). Moreover, in understanding the Idea as the “intellectual intuition” of an absolute, we must also recognize that the Idea has nothing to do with what it is in particular. That is to say, the Idea is always paradoxically separate from itself as itself. In his insistence that the Idea is “absolutely perceptive” (234) Schopenhauer is insisting on this paradoxical grounding of the Idea—which is not something material—with its material substrate. As strange as such a notion might seem, it is hardly unprecedented in the writers we have discussed before:

When, however, an external cause or inward disposition suddenly raises us out of the endless stream of willing, and snatches knowledge from the thralldom of the will, the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively ... But this is just the state that I described above as necessary for knowledge of the Idea, as pure contemplation, absorption in perception, being lost in the object, forgetting all individuality, abolishing the kind of knowledge which follows the principle of sufficient reason, and comprehends only relations. It is the state where, simultaneously and inseparably, the perceived individual thing is raised to the Idea of its species, and the knowing individual to the pure subject of will-less knowing, and now the two, as such, no longer stand in the stream of time and of all other relations. It is then all the same whether we see the setting sun from a prison or from a palace. (196–7)

Building upon the important “First Moment” of Kant’s “Analytic of the Beautiful,” Schopenhauer describes how the “object” of aesthetic contemplation must be “disinterested,” that is, free from any practical application whatsoever. (Elsewhere Schopenhauer is even more explicit in his appropriation of Kant’s notion: “In other words, genius is the ability to leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims ...” 185.) But Schopenhauer, like Fichte, goes considerably further than Kant in expanding the notion of “disinterestedness” to include freedom from the will and its governing “principle of sufficient reason.” The will is the temporal reality of our own subjective striving, and, as such, it is governed by the “principle of sufficient reason” as the limited truth of our own immediate needs and concerns. But whereas this “reality principle” of our constantly striving will is only known to us through the temporally limited experiences of our everyday reality, it is possible according to Schopenhauer for the will to stand outside itself and know itself through the intellectual intuition of aesthetic contemplation or “pure knowing.”

This explains the apparent contradiction noted above in which the will and “will-less” art are both absolute. The will is absolute, but it can never know itself as such, for it knows only what it knows objectively at any given moment: “Time is merely the spread-out and piecemeal view that an individual being has of the Ideas. These are outside time, and consequently eternal” (I. 176). In this sense, the will has the figurative structure of a metonymy which is always separate from itself. On the other hand, for the absolute will to appear as itself it must stand outside the metonymic outside in returning to the absolute inside of the will itself. This is why the aesthetic absolute has what Derrida famously referred to as the double, “invaginated” structure of something which is not what it is but, at the same time, is what it is not.

It is this double structure of a sensible, will-less will that Schopenhauer refers to as the Idea. Because it is separate from itself as itself, it must also be separate from both its objective reality as well as its subjectivity—which is of course merely a displaced form of the same objectivity. It is thus also a “forgetting” that, as Schopenhauer’s most famous student was to insist, is constituent of a higher form of remembering, that forgets what ordinarily is in order to remember what ordinarily isn’t.⁷ As such, aesthetic contemplation “contemplates only relations” in always standing outside itself, and so in also always standing outside itself standing outside itself. The Idea is thus also “the Idea of its species,” because it necessarily raises itself above the particularity of anything individual—thereby dispelling the *hic et nunc* of any particularity whatsoever—including the particular place we happen to be, whether it be that of “a palace or a prison.”

Note, too, that Schopenhauer does not insist on the irrelevance of whether we are in a palace or a prison in reality, but on the irrelevance of place when contemplating something aesthetically, such as the setting sun. Even here we find an echo of Schopenhauer’s teacher, for we are reminded of Kant’s use of the setting sun as one of his exemplary “aesthetic ideas” in the *Critique of Judgment* (“Analytic of the Sublime,” #49):

When the great King expresses himself in one of his poems by saying:

*Oui, finissons sans trouble, et mourons sans regrets,
En laissant l’Univers comblé de nos bienfaits.
Ainsi l’Astre du jour, au bout de sa carrière,
Répond sur l’horizon une douce lumière ...*

⁷ “Die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, das sie welche sind.” *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im Aussermoralischen Sinne*.

(Let us end without trouble, and die without regrets,
 Leaving the universe filled with our good deeds,
 As the light of day, at the end of its journey,
 Diffuses a gentle light upon the horizon)

(translation mine)

... he kindles in this way ... his rational idea ... such as no expression within the compass of a definite concept completely attains.

Although there is a telling difference between the two philosophers in the way that Kant sees the setting sun as a symbol of virtue and Schopenhauer sees virtue as clearly irrelevant (we might be in a palace or a prison), the difference is perhaps not that great after all, for Kant's notion of virtue, as we know, is based on a freedom from objective determinations just as is Schopenhauer's. Moreover, we might also note that Kant's notion of "aesthetic ideas," which is his notion of the philosophical value of metaphorical, figurative language, is synonymous with Schopenhauer's Idea as the necessarily figurative expression of a higher "Truth" that is always "beside itself."

If many of the aesthetic ideas of Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer seem like amplifications—rather than alterations—of Kant's "aesthetic ideas" (it was left to Schopenhauer, for example, to note that the notion of "aesthetic ideas" is itself an aesthetic Idea), this is especially true of Schopenhauer's notion of genius, which Schopenhauer relates directly to his aesthetic appropriation of the Platonic Idea just as Kant implicitly related it to his notion of the "aesthetic idea": "Now my proposition is that this principle [#49, "The Faculties of the Mind which Constitute Genius"] is nothing else than the faculty of presenting aesthetic ideas." As with Kant, the genius does not traffic in concepts (which is why, according to Schelling, the notion of genius is wrongly applied to scientific thought⁸) but in Ideas which are "absolutely perceptive":

The Idea, on the other hand ... is absolutely perceptive and, although representing an infinite number of individual things, is yet thoroughly definite. It is never known by the individual as such, but only by him who has raised himself above all willing and all individuality to the pure subject of knowing. Thus it is attainable only by the genius, and the one who, mostly with the assistance of works of genius has raised his power of pure knowledge and is now in the frame of mind of the genius. (234)

⁸ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 222.

The same “perceptive Idea” which condemns the work of art in Hegel to a mere “sinnliche Erscheinung der Idee” is here seen as “the adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself at its highest grade” (244–5). Where Hegel sees only the deprivation of thought by its embeddedness in mere matter, Schopenhauer sees the “intellectual intuition” of an absolute that is *always more* than itself, always more than its material substrate and its intellectual idea. And yet, as Schopenhauer also notes, the absolute is also “thoroughly definite,” for while it always exceeds itself it also exceeds *that* by taking a definite form. Such “exceeding” is also the common “definition” of the Will, which can only be defined by its “going over” any definition (see the discussion of the Will as a “Hinübergehen” in Nietzsche⁹), and so the “pure knowledge” of the Will, which itself exceeds the objectification of the Will as governed by the principle of sufficient reason, alone succeeds in representing the will itself. Finally, it is worth noting how, in this passage as before, Schopenhauer makes room for we critics, connoisseurs and “commentators” who, “with the assistance of works of genius,” also attain this “pure knowledge” of the absolute.

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Having established Schopenhauer’s general notion of the Platonic Idea as the perception—the “intellectual intuition”—of the absolute, we can now turn to Schopenhauer’s explicit identification of this notion with the work of art:

But now, what kind of knowledge is it that considers what continues to exist outside and independently of all relations, but which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and is therefore known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the Ideas that are the immediate and adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself, of the will? *It is art, the work of genius* ... (184, emphasis mine)

A great debt is owed to Christopher Janaway’s recent collection of essays (*Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche’s Educator*) for its goal of reclaiming Schopenhauer’s importance in general as well as (as is more frequently recognized) for Nietzsche in particular, but it is unfortunate that Janaway falls victim to the tendency to dismiss the importance Schopenhauer placed on art (“deliverance from life and suffering [is] a condition glimpsed in

⁹ See my discussion of Heidegger’s notion of “rapturous overabundance” in *Rapturous Overabundance: Tragedy after Nietzsche*.

art, but only truly reached when one's will to life turns against itself").¹⁰ That being said, it is perhaps no surprise that when Schopenhauer turns from his discussion of the Idea to the work of art his language becomes essentially, and intentionally, metaphoric, for art, unlike science, is figuratively based on the tropological structure of a synecdoche expressing the All, the whole in the particular, whereas science (and objectivity in general) sees only the particular ("art on the contrary is everywhere at its goal ... this particular thing becomes for art a representative of the whole," 185):

This latter method [science] can be compared to a line running horizontally, and the former [art] to a vertical line cutting the horizontal at any point ... The first [science] is like the mighty storm, rushing along without beginning or aim, bending, agitating, and carrying everything away with it; the second is like the silent sunbeam, cutting through the path of the storm, and quite unmoved by it. The first is like the innumerable violently agitated drops of the waterfall, constantly changing and never for a moment at rest; the second is like the rainbow silently resting on this raging torrent. (I. 185)

The first metaphor, that of horizontal and vertical lines, can itself be compared to the well-known structuralist opposition between the metaphorical, synchronic axis of comparison/substitution and the "horizontal," diachronic axis of time. Although Jakobson famously (and problematically) compared these two lines to lyric poetry versus prose narratives,¹¹ for Schopenhauer all art, including prose narratives and metonymic substitutions, stands outside time by standing inside time itself, without such things as beginning, middle and end. Scientific knowledge, on the other hand, stands inside time by standing outside it, separating "objects" whose reality is defined by denying the timeless, metaphorical unity of life.¹² In this respect, one might say that scientific knowledge gives us a reality which is a myth while artistic, metaphoric knowledge gives us a myth which is reality.

The second set of metaphors is equally interesting in referring to another familiar set of terms, this time to the sublime storm of science as opposed to the beautiful sunbeam, "cutting through the path of the storm, and quite unmoved by it." Cognitive knowledge is like a storm insofar as it destroys what it could

¹⁰ *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator*, 2.

¹¹ "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," *On Language*.

¹² Here, again, we note the influence of Spinoza on Kant and the Idealists, particularly his statement that "Omnis determinatio negatio est." See the essay of this title by Yitzhak Melamed in *Spinoza and German Idealism*.

contemplate by knowing it and thereby cutting off its connection to other living beings. On the other hand, the sunbeam which “cuts through the storm” illuminates rather than destroys its “object.” In its comparison to art the sunbeam is not to be confused with the object of its illumination, for it is also the light, not the object alone that matters. Finally, the rainbow. This beautiful image of the aesthetic absolute expresses the “sensible appearance of an Idea” which, as Diotima describes it, is a “beauty whose nature is marvelous indeed” because of, and not despite, the fact that it is as necessarily transitory as any experience of an unchanging absolute.

This curious but necessary relationship of the absolute to the transitory (if something is absolute it must also be transitory) is evident in the conclusion of a passage quoted earlier, where Schopenhauer refers aesthetic disinterestedness, with its “absorption in perception, being lost in the object, forgetting all individuality, abolishing the kind of knowledge which follows the principle of sufficient reason,” to the seeming “insignificance” of art in general and Dutch still-life painting in particular:

It is the state where, simultaneously and inseparably, the perceived individual thing is raised to the Idea of its species, and the knowing individual to the pure subject of will-less knowing, and now the two, as such, no longer stand in the stream of time and of all other relations ... This is shown by those admirable Dutchmen who directed such purely objective perception to the most insignificant objects ...” (196–7)

One cannot help but compare this reference to Dutch art to Hegel’s, whose *Lectures* give begrudging approval to the introduction of ordinary objects into the “romantic” (or we would say, modern) stage of art in general and Dutch painting in particular. For Schopenhauer, on the other hand, Dutch still-life painting is not relegated to subordinate status, because his theory, unlike Hegel’s, does not devalorize the sensible in lieu of the Idea. The Idea for Schopenhauer is never, as for Hegel, purely rational (this is also the basis of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza’s absolute), but embedded in a material thing which (as we just saw) is illuminated by an absolute light that immediately elevates the mere thing to “the Idea of its species,” that is, to an absolute which joins this or that particular thing to something—or everything—outside itself. Thus, “those admirable Dutchmen who directed such purely objective perception to the most insignificant objects” are no different from any other artist who sees an object as it is absolutely, and not as a mere object separate from others. In this sense, the Greek art which

Hegel preferred is in reality no different from Dutch painting or the pyramids of Giza (or, for that matter, a pair of peasant's boots¹³) insofar as they all represent an Idea which is absolute *and* contained within its material substrate.

Insofar as the work of art is absolute it is nothing, for it is an idea that is its material substrate and a material substrate that is an Idea. And yet, to ignore an artistic, absolute nothingness which is the "nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is" (Stevens, *The Snow Man*) is to ignore a supersensible reality which is far greater than the ordinary reality of our everyday lives:

For at the moment when, torn from the will, we have given ourselves up to pure, will-less knowing, we have stepped into another world, where everything that moves our will, and thus violently agitates us, no longer exists. This liberation of knowledge lifts us as wholly and completely above all this as do sleep and dreams. (199)

As is well known, it is this "step into another world" that caused Nietzsche to abandon his teacher's "escapism," but this critique is based on the false assumption that this other world is somehow separate from the real one—art for Schopenhauer *is* reality without the limitations of the "principle of sufficient reason." As I argue in the following Appendix on Nietzsche's supposed rejection of the Kantian absolute, this is a gross misunderstanding of Kant and the other Idealists, including Schopenhauer, for that other world is obviously the same real one that according to Nietzsche, as well as Freud, is forgotten in the name of a "reality principle" that forgets the greater reality of "sleep and dreams." This is not, for Schopenhauer, Nietzsche or Freud, a naive preference for dreams over waking reality, for that would be tantamount to turning the other world of art and dreams into the same world it would deny. Rather, it is the appeal to an absolute that is forgotten the moment it is remembered and remembered the moment it is forgotten, for such is the nature of an aesthetic absolute that can never be known as such, but which, when it is experienced, is "another world" than the objective reality of everything we know.

Music as the Absolute. As is well known, Schopenhauer privileged music over the other arts as the most direct expression of the absolute Will. All the other arts are essentially visual in representing the will in some form that, as we have shown, cannot be the "object" that it is (in this respect all art does not

¹³ I am referring, of course, to Heidegger's discussion of van Gogh in the *Origin of the Work of Art*, but also to its famous rejoinders (those "boots are made for walking"!) by Meyer Schapiro, Jacques Derrida, and others.

only 'aspire to music' (Pater), it *is* musical), whereas music, in not representing anything but itself, expresses the absolute essence of art most directly:

Therefore if music tries to stick too closely to the words, and to mold itself according to the events, it is endeavoring to speak a language not its own. No one has kept so free from this mistake as Rossini; hence his music speaks its own language so distinctly and purely that it requires no words at all, and therefore produces its full effect even when rendered by instruments alone. (I. 262)

This separation of music from the verbal does not mean, however, that Schopenhauer is unaware of the powerful synthesis that can occur when the two are placed together, for, since both music and images present or represent the absolute, the combination of the two is exponentially greater:

This close relation that music has to the true nature of things can also explain the fact that, when music suitable to any scene, action, event or environment is played, it seems to disclose to us its most secret meaning, and appears to be the most accurate and distinct commentary on it. (262)

Words to songs that have no logical relationship to one another yet seem to fit perfectly, the powerful effect of a musical score, however anachronous, to drama or, in our time, in film, are to be understood as the convergence of two different things within the same absolute. On the other hand, any attempt to make music conceptual in relating it to something objective is roundly rejected, because the relation between word and music is not referential but, rather, based on their "common denominator," the absolute:

But the analogy discovered by the composer between these two must have come from the immediate knowledge of the inner nature of the world unknown to his faculty of reason; it cannot be an imitation brought about with conscious intention by means of concepts, otherwise the music does not express the inner nature of the will itself, but merely imitates its phenomenon inadequately. All really imitative music does this; for example, *The Seasons* by Haydn also many passages of his *Creation*, where phenomena of the world of perception are directly imitated; also in battle pieces. All this is to be entirely rejected. (I. 263–4)

Music exists, according to Schopenhauer, because it represents an absolute which exists prior to its separation, first, into phenomena, and, second, into concepts of those phenomena:

For, as we have said, music differs from all the other arts by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon, or, more exactly, of the will's adequate objectivity,

but is directly a copy of the will itself, *and therefore expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon.* (262, emphasis mine)

Music simply does what all the arts do, namely, express the absolute, but it does so in the simplest and most direct way while becoming, paradoxically, the least accessible of all the arts in terms of understanding:

The inexpressible depth of all music, by virtue of which it floats past us as a paradise quite familiar and yet eternally remote, and is so easy to understand and yet so inexplicable, is due to the fact that it reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being ... (264)

In this same passage Schopenhauer explains why music is so much more repetitious than the other arts: we take particular pleasure in returning to a source—the absolute—which can never be known as such, and so can only be incessantly returned to. However, it is worth noting that the same principle of repetition (“to comprehend it fully, we must hear it twice”) has long been noted (see Longinus, “On the Sublime”) as a cardinal principle of all great art.

Music in particular, and all art in general, is metaphysics: “Supposing we succeeded in giving a perfectly accurate and complete explanation of music which goes into detail, and thus a detailed repetition in concepts of what it expresses, *this would also be at once a sufficient repetition and explanation of the world in concepts, or one wholly corresponding thereto, and hence the true philosophy* (I. 264, emphasis mine). The implications of this statement, which resolves the age-old “war” between poetry and philosophy by virtue of their similar “obsession” with the “thing-in-itself,” are enormous. Recent trends in continental philosophy and literary theory give independent corroboration to Schopenhauer’s statement (independent because Schopenhauer is largely ignored even by those eager to reevaluate the importance of Idealism) by taking Schopenhauer up on his notion of a “true philosophy” that would “understand” music in particular and listening in general:

Hasn’t philosophy superimposed upon listening, beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening, something else that might be more on the order of understanding? Isn’t the philosopher someone who always hears but who cannot listen?¹⁴

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, 1.

What one must add to this re-evaluation of metaphysics in aural terms that would challenge the predominately visual, “logocentric,” tradition is the notion of metaphysics itself, a notion which, as we have attempted to trace throughout this work, and as is clearly evident in Schopenhauer’s metaphysical notion of art and music, has nothing to do with the “logocentric” attempts to “know” the absolute, and everything to do with a rethinking of metaphysics in aesthetic terms—precisely the sort of “aesthetic metaphysics” that Nietzsche argued for, and which gives the lie to all those who would attempt to understand art less metaphysically and metaphysics less artistically. If it is the case, as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Nancy, Silverman and others have argued,¹⁵ that an “otology” of listening must come to replace the previous “ontology” of conceptual, visual-based knowledge, this must include listening to philosophers—beginning with Plato, but including the often derided German Idealists and, especially, Schopenhauer—whose arguments regarding “art as the absolute” have not been heard or, if they have, have never really been listened to:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on ...

¹⁵ Derrida, “Otobiographies,” *The Ear of the Other*, and *Politiques de l’amitié*; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, #34, “Da-sein und Rede. Die Sprache”; Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*.

Appendix: *Nietzsche's Wrath: Nietzsche's Critique of the Kantian Absolute*¹

*But it happens that a careful reading of those who denounce metaphysics most vigorously (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Deleuze in his fashion) easily shows that they never shared the somewhat vulgar simplicity of this representation. Jean-Luc Nancy*²

In his recent book on *The Tragic Absolute* David Krell writes:

A typical Nietzschean reference to the Absolute appears in the second aphorism of the first part of *Human, All-Too-Human*. Here Nietzsche denies the existence of eternal, “absolute” truths. Several pages later in *Human*, the word absolute appears again, as it does scores of times in Nietzsche’s oeuvre. One has to concede, of course, that Nietzsche is in no sense a philosopher of the Absolute in Hegel’s sense. Yet would it not be enlightening to see his work, from *The Birth of Tragedy*, through *Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, ... up to *Twilight* ... as an extended essay in tragic thinking—a thinking that elevates tragedy to absolute significance and thinks the Absolute as tragic?³

Krell’s assessment of Nietzsche’s rejection of the absolute is yet another statement,⁴ with the one by Nancy quoted above, that this rejection is itself to be rejected as “vulgar” and “simplistic,” and that Nietzsche in fact supports a certain notion of the absolute throughout his writings. The purpose of this Appendix is to sort out this confusion and, in the process, to understand better what aspects of the Kantian, and more generally Idealist, notion of the absolute discussed throughout this work might be said to survive Nietzsche’s seemingly devastating

¹ A portion of this essay appeared in *Philosophy and Literature and the Crisis of Metaphysics*.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, 7.

³ *The Tragic Absolute*, 420–1. As mentioned in the Preface to this work, and in my earlier work on Nietzsche, the “tragic absolute” is a state of “rapturous overabundance” (*Rausch*) that extends to all art and is thus less “tragic” than Krell would have it.

⁴ For Nietzsche’s relation to the metaphysical tradition, see also Stephen Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics*, which agrees with my thesis that Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics is ambiguous, but Houlgate argues for a vitalistic, rather than an aesthetic, alternative to same.

critique. In the first part of this essay I will discuss the 2nd Preface to the *Gay Science* (FW, 1886), while the second section will focus on the 2nd Preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* (GT, also written in 1886). It is perhaps no coincidence that our understanding here of Nietzsche's position with regard to the absolute should be found in these two curiously metaleptic "Second Prefaces" (both were written after the works they "preface"—much longer in the case of *The Birth of Tragedy*) which contain the truth of the works contained within them. And what of the fact that we are including this discussion of Nietzsche's veiled discussion of the veiled absolute in yet another veiled text, in an Appendix that reverses Nietzsche's metalepse in appearing before the book (it was published earlier) and after the main body of the text? Is it possible that the veil of the absolute might ultimately appear after, and not before, the absolute? That under the absolute is a veil which "re-veals" the absolute itself? If it turns out, as the quotations from Nancy and Krell suggest, that Nietzsche does indeed support a certain notion of the absolute even as he is deriding the very idea in these two "veils" or Prefaces, then, as suggested in the Preface to *this* work, perhaps the veil of the absolute might be retained as the absolute of the veil, as the very absolute that the veil purportedly conceals.

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The Gay Science. In section 4 (the last) of the 2nd Preface to FW, Nietzsche dismisses as "shameful," "tasteless" and even "indecent" (*unanständig*) those who, like the "Egyptian youth" of Schiller's poem about the veiled Isis (1795), would seek to know "the All." Notwithstanding the fact that Schiller's poem also chides and then condemns the young man's immorality,⁵ Nietzsche says that, nearly a hundred years after this pursuit of the absolute,

⁵ Although not ostensibly about Schiller or his poem, this comment by Schelling touches directly on its idea; in it Schelling (among others) dismisses the morality which underlies both Schiller's poem and Nietzsche's critique:

Es dünkt Ihnen grosser, gegen eine absolute Macht zu kämpfen und kämpfend unter-zugehen, als sich zum Voraus gegen alle Gefahr durch einen moralischen Sort zu sichern. (*Brief I, Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus*, 22)

(You think it greater to struggle against the absolute and thereby perish than to save yourself through some morality.)

In light of the way Schelling's *Brief* re-enacts Schiller's poem, as indeed all readings of the poem re-enact the poem itself, one should be wary of any univocal or otherwise simplistic reading of the veil of Isis—one should take seriously, as Pierre Hadot certainly does in his magisterial treatise, the words of the oracle: 'No mortal hath lifted my veil!'

This youthful madness in the love of truth offends us: for that we are too experienced, too serious, too merry, too burned, too profound. We no longer believe that truth remains truth when its veil is withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this. (38)

Although one is tempted to defend Schiller's version of the metaphysical pursuit by noting, again, that his poem does not endorse the "youth's madness" any more than does Nietzsche, nor does it naively "believe that truth remains truth when its veils are withdrawn" (Schiller's young man, ironically like Nietzsche himself, lapses into his own "insanity" and later dies after seeing the absolute), there is much that is valid in Nietzsche's critique of the poem and of the metaphysical pursuit to know "the All" that it describes. However, the essence of the critique, I will argue, lies in Nietzsche's failure to distinguish a certain "dogmatic" understanding of "metaphysics" from other notions of the absolute, such as that of the Kantian/Idealist aesthetic absolute discussed here, an absolute that is "too profound" to be profound, and thus found in the superficial "veil" of the work of art. It is not really, I will maintain, the notion of an absolute or "X" which Nietzsche decries but, rather, the claim to know this "X" in anything other than aesthetic terms—a knowledge which, as Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer and others (including Heidegger) make perfectly clear, is something other than knowledge *in strictu sensu*: "Kein Satz kann seiner Natur nach *grundloser* sein als der, der ein absolutes im menschlichen Wissen behauptet."⁶ Moreover it is, to quote Tilottma Rajan's recent volume on *Idealism without Absolutes*, an absolute "without the totalizing formulas often associated with post-Kantian philosophy."⁷

Schiller's "youthful madness" is no longer possible, Nietzsche continues, because "The trust in life is gone: life itself has become a *problem*." What Nietzsche means by this is obviously not that life is a "problem" in the sense of something to be figured out or understood. Indeed, it is precisely in *not*

⁶ Schelling, *Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus*, 84.

⁷ Tilottma Rajan, *Idealism without Absolutes*, 1. The point of this work, and its larger project of positing an "aesthetic absolute," is to me compatible, if not synonymous, with what Rajan proposes as "idealist materiality." Perhaps this other absolute might be deemed, following Rajan's formulation, an "absolute without absolutes." That this other absolute is "alive and well" in Rajan's volume is apparent in many of its essays; e.g.:

poetry makes possible the bridging of the gap to the supersensible. It opens the possibility for the phenomenal to stand as a schema for the nonphenomenal. Irreducible to any concept, poetry is the source of the excess of thought over language and thus emerges as a language in excess of language ... the absolute is thus brought back to life by a material, a stuff, which is never properly that. (Jan Plug, "Romanticism and the Invention of Literature," 21–2)

being this sort of problem that life becomes a problem. Life is a problem because it is no longer something that is known or can be known. This is not, to be sure, an anti-intellectual appeal to ignorance, for mankind's new-found lack of trust in and knowledge of himself is precisely what is to be deconstructed through the investigation of who we are, and what motivates us, which is found throughout Nietzsche's writings. Indeed, to relegate the "problem" of existence to our necessary ignorance about ourselves would be to indulge in the worst sort of intellectualism. Rather, I would argue that it is precisely because Nietzsche's project is still so closely akin to the metaphysical agenda of knowing the truth of things-in-themselves and who we really are that Nietzsche is compelled to attack traditional metaphysics and with it a certain aspect of the Kantian "Ding-an-sich"⁸ that is not, in fact, the aesthetic metaphysics—aestheti-physics—of Kant, Schopenhauer, and the others discussed here.

Indeed, Nietzsche's oft-stated misunderstanding of Kant's notion of aesthetic "disinterestedness" is of capital importance here:

... [true] objectivity is not understood as 'intuition without interest' (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability to control one's For and Against and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge.⁹

Kant's—and that of the other Idealists' discussed here—embrace of aesthetic disinterestedness is exactly this "ability to control one's For and Against," and not the intellectual vacuum which Nietzsche here decries. Indeed, it is odd to see Nietzsche repeating Hegel's famous (and famously obtuse) critique of the absolute (in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*) in Schelling and others as "a night in which all cows are black."

The persistence of this metaphysical "absolute without absolutes" in Nietzsche is evident when he describes how the "pain" that accompanies this recognition that "everything is problematic" will:

probably not make us "better"; but I know that it makes us more profound ... Only great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit, being the teacher of the great suspicion that turns every U into an X ...

⁸ In "On the Spirit and Letter in Philosophy" Fichte makes these two senses of the "Ding-an-sich," which might be summarized by a distinction between the "thing-in-itself" and the absolute, clearer when he refers to the former as the "dogmatic" reification of the absolute.

⁹ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, quoted by Janaway, 34.

Such “pain” is the recognition of our being problematical; that is, of our not knowing who we really are, as well (necessarily) as our not knowing our not knowing who we really are. The individual is thus “liberated” by this original suffering because he or she has now become their own absolute, or “X,” as Nietzsche puts it.¹⁰

It is in opposition to this profound joyful suffering that Nietzsche posits “pleasure,” after which he turns to heap his scorn upon Schiller’s youth and, by implication, Kant: “How repulsive pleasure is now, that crude, musty, brown pleasure as it is understood by those who enjoy pleasure, our “educated” people, our rich people, and our rulers!” What angers Nietzsche about such pleasure, as opposed to the tragic “gaiety” that Nietzsche everywhere approves, is that it knows what it is about; that is, it defines itself with regard to a particular object of pleasure rather than losing itself in the “object” of its delight. It is for this reason that Nietzsche also turns against art if it is understood *as art*; that is, as refined pleasure (as opposed to suffering) recognized as such by the “educated.”

Just as Nietzsche is not (of course) rejecting pleasure or art but rather a certain notion of pleasure and art which he wrongly associates with Kant, so he is not really rejecting the absolute but, rather, a certain notion of metaphysics which he associates with Kant and others. It is for this reason that, immediately after stating his objections to “pleasure” and “art” as objects of knowledge he turns his diatribe against Schiller’s “Egyptian youth.” *Nietzsche rejects any notion of the “veiled absolute” because, in knowing what it is about, in knowing what it can never know, it is denying itself the access to the very “All” that it posits through its understanding of the All as veiled.* This formulation raises a number of important questions, three of which I would like to consider. *First:* if Nietzsche is opposed to the veiling of the truth, why, at the conclusion of this Preface, does he complain about the *un*-veiled truth as a case of “indecent exposure” when he compares this to the figure of Baubo, the mortal woman who famously exposed herself in order to make Demeter laugh? *Second:* is Kant’s notion of the veiled absolute as postulated in the *Critique of Judgment*, and later by Fichte, Schelling and others who take up Kant’s position, really to be rejected on these grounds? *Third* (and most importantly): what does Nietzsche’s example of the “All” look like insofar as it is *not* to be understood as a veiled object of understanding?

¹⁰ Kaufmann notes that there is a German expression for deceiving someone by “passing off a U as an X” that itself refers back to the Roman deception of turning a “V” into an “X.” (*The Gay Science*, fn. 6, 36). Whether one is suspicious that what is known (X) is really something else (U) or that what is known (U) is really unknown (X)—Kaufmann suggests both—the end result is the same.

First: If Nietzsche is opposed to the veiling of the truth, why, at the conclusion of this Preface, does he complain about the unveiled truth as a case of “indecent exposure” when he compares it to the figure of Baubo, the mortal woman who exposed her genitals in order to make Demeter laugh? Although this is the easiest of the three questions to answer, there are further implications to Nietzsche’s invocation of Baubo that are not quite so easily dismissed. Because Nietzsche is opposed to the veiled absolute he must also be opposed to the *unveiled* absolute insofar as the latter is a function of the former, with the result that he ridicules the Kantian/Schillerian absolute as the ultimate example of indecent exposure, namely, exposure of what is most “shameful,” the female “*pudenda*”—“that of which one ought to be ashamed.” Desiring to see the All, as do Schiller’s “Egyptian youths” (Nietzsche uses the plural), is reduced by Nietzsche to the shame of exposing one’s genitals (“*Sham*,” in German as opposed to English, is related to the embarrassing sight of the genitalia—both male and female, vs. “*pudenda*,” which refers just to the latter) because it is the ultimate example of seeing what ought to be covered up.

That being said, there is more to Nietzsche’s reference here to Baubo, and exposed genitalia, than merely “meets the eye,” more than merely a convenient example with which to ridicule the Kantian sense of morals that informs his metaphysics (and vice versa) and thus turns the most metaphysical of pursuits into the pursuit of what is most immoral, what is most in need of being covered up. To understand the full scope of Nietzsche’s Baubo-reference we must recall that, in Schiller’s poem, the youth’s desire to lift the veil of Isis is described in highly erotic terms which are even more evident in Schiller than they are in Nietzsche:

The youth now sought his home, absorbed in thought
 His burning wish to solve the mystery
 Banished all sleep; upon his couch he lay,
 Tossing his feverish limbs
 Led by a mighty impulse, he bent his way,
 The walls he scaled, and soon one active spring
 Landed the daring boy beneath the dome.¹¹

Oddly, it would seem that in rejecting Schiller’s “youthful madness” as obscene Nietzsche is merely repeating what Schiller had himself rejected in the very

¹¹ Schiller’s *Works*, vol. IV, 197.

poem which Nietzsche is ridiculing—namely, introducing sex into a discussion of something as serious as that of the absolute. And yet, there are also a number of important differences between these two versions of what we might call the sexualization of Isis—a sexualization which, as Pierre Hadot has demonstrated, has never been very far from the figure's numerous incarnations.¹² Just as it is unlikely that Nietzsche would really ridicule the overt sexuality of Baubo, it is unlikely that the philosopher who prefers the laughter of the Greek gods to their Judeo-Christian counterparts would censure the woman famous for making a mournful Demeter laugh. And, moreover, it is unlikely that Nietzsche would censure, at least not ironically, a figure associated with the celebrated earliest Dionysian/Eleusinian tendencies of Greek civilization.¹³ Nietzsche is not, then, really ridiculing the figure of Baubo but rather the veiling, covering up or censuring of that figure in poems like Schiller's. Thus, the figure of Baubo functions exactly like the figure of the absolute insofar as both are not ultimately denied by Nietzsche but only criticized for being covered up in the name of decency.

Second: Is Kant's notion of the veiled absolute as it appears in the third *Critique*, Kant's own "aesthetic metaphysics," to be rejected on the grounds that we have described, namely, on the grounds that it veils the absolute as a transcendent supersensible object which is as epistemologically absurd as it is morally "indecent" to know? As should be obvious to even the most casual reader of the third *Critique*, Kant's "aesthetic object" is no object, but rather a synthesis of objective knowledge (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*) that frees the object from any determinant judgment of its boundaries even as it imposes the aesthetic boundaries of its own "indeterminant judgment," or "*Urteilkraft*." (As Nassar points out in her recent study of *The Romantic Absolute*, the absolute must be "cognitive and existential," "epistemological and metaphysical" and, above all, "nondiscursive or nonconceptual."¹⁴) Kant provides many examples of this in his *Critique*: the beautiful palace of the "First Moment" of the *Critique* that is derided by a long list of *interested* spectators extending from Rousseau and the Iroquois Sachem to Derrida and Bourdieu; the "faculties of the mind that constitute genius" that refuse to follow any pre-established rules or principles in creating the rules and principles that others may follow; the "aesthetic ideas"

¹² Hadot refers to the "many-breasted" (*polymaston*) figure of Artemis as a version of the figure of Isis.

¹³ "Nietzsche urges us 'to remain faithful to the earth, and not to believe those who speak of other worldly hopes.'" Mary Nichols, *Socrates on Friendship and Community*, 2.

¹⁴ Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 5.

of metaphorical tropes and figures that provide imaginary images of truths that cannot be known as such (the eagle of Jupiter, the setting sun as an image of the end of a virtuous life) and, finally, the veiled Isis as the “most sublime” rendering of the absolute. None of these are true in the sense of providing objective knowledge of something (as Tilottma Rajan says, “the aesthetic idea is not strictly speaking an idea at all”¹⁵), including the absolute, but all of these are “true illusions” of a supersensible “X” that can never be known as such.

How, then, do these “true illusions” differ from Nietzsche’s own famous “illusions that we have not forgotten are illusions”¹⁶? Differ, indeed, to the point that Nietzsche rejects the former in lieu of the latter? Not at all. Rather, Nietzsche’s contemptuous rejection of the Kantian/Schillerian notion of the veiled Isis as a figure of the supersensible is precisely that: a *contemptuous* rejection, and it is this measure of contempt, or wrath, that helps to explain how Nietzsche’s own notion of the absolute, of the aesthetic, of art, and of metaphor differ from what seem to be Kant’s similar notions. Rarely if ever does Nietzsche mention Kant in general and his (and others’) notion of the “X” in particular without this contempt, which is significant precisely because, in disregarding Nietzsche’s tone, in reading his diatribe in a more neutral (dare I say Kantian?) manner, we are also disregarding the reason for his anger.

“Nietzsche’s wrath,” his anger at the very notion of a supersensible, of an “aesthetic idea,” of the sublime, of the absolute, of a “veiled Isis” as a figure of the supersensible, is key to understanding his rejection of all these things, for without it there is no difference between his “true illusions” and those of Kant, his notion of the absolute and that of Kant, his theory of metaphoricity and that of Kant. In talking about the absolute in the neutral, “metaphysical,” philosophical manner that Kant and others do one falls into the trap of describing an aesthetic experience as though it were objectively knowable, even while acknowledging, as Kant and the other Idealists discussed here clearly do, that the aesthetic is NOT objectively knowable. It is not that Nietzsche has anything against the things that Kant is talking about: the palace of Versailles, genius, sublimity, Jupiter’s eagle (where would Zarathustra be without it?), the veil of Isis, the absolute, etc. It’s just that Kant talks about the aesthetic as though it

¹⁵ “Toward a Cultural Idealism,” *Idealism without Absolutes*; Rajan’s generous reading of the third *Critique* argues for Kant as a philosopher of “what Jacques Derrida calls *différance*” (58), although it is doubtful that Derrida, based on his decidedly ungenerous reading of Kant in his famous deconstruction of the “*paregon*” in *La vérité en peinture*, would have agreed.

¹⁶ “Die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, das sie welche sind.” *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im Aussermoralischen Sinne*.

were an object of knowledge (which, also according to Kant, it most definitely is not) rather than as the “rapturously overabundant”¹⁷ doubling of all these things: the sublimely sublime, the absolute absolute, the “beyond beyond” (Derrida), the genius of genius and, most importantly here, the veiling of the “veil of Isis,” against which Nietzsche’s only real complaint is that Kant and Schiller veil the figure of the divine as though it were a potential source of knowledge rather than acknowledging the divine nature of the veiled figure—i.e. the work of art—itself. Nietzsche’s wrath, like that of Achilles which, it would not be much of an overstatement to say, is the origin of all Western art,¹⁸ is to be understood as a rejection of the absolute only insofar as it is *understood*, rather than as something divine which, like all divinity, can only exist, like wrath itself, “beside itself.” (In English one speaks of wrath as a state of being “beside oneself.”) In this sense only should Nietzsche’s divine wrath be understood as the very opposite of the veiled truth, for although it, too, exists beside itself, it is that which is beside itself, as opposed to the Kantian model of an absolute which is separate from us as though it were an object of knowledge.

Third: What does Nietzsche’s example of the “All” look like insofar as it is not to be understood as veiled? Nietzsche’s wrath is not to be understood as an “emotional absolute,” (as Kant maintained, nothing is less absolute or “disinterested” than emotions), but rather as the rejection of an unemotional absolute insofar as the latter is incompatible with Nietzsche’s “aesthetic metaphysic.” The problem, again, with Kant’s own “aesthetic metaphysics” is that, while it is “all about pleasure” (Derrida¹⁹), his is a veiled pleasure that is seemingly defined by the cognitive position of the knower rather than, for Nietzsche, as the unveiled pleasure of an *aesthetic* metaphysic in which “life is only justified in aesthetic terms.” In order to better understand this oft-quoted but little understood phrase we must turn to the second of our Second Prefaces, the “Versuch einer Selbstkritik” of *The Birth of Tragedy* ...

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¹⁷ I discussed this particular pattern of aesthetic doubling in *Rapturous Overabundance: Tragedy after Nietzsche*.

¹⁸ “Wrath” (*mênis*) is an often overlooked motivation in many Greek tragedies; cf., for example, the wrath of Antigone in being insulted by Creon and Ismene, and Dionysus’ wrath at the insult to him and his mother Semele in Euripides’ final play. This is surprising given the fact that it is the same word (*Ménin aeide thea* ...) that begins Western literature: “Sing, goddess, the wrath of Achilles ...”

¹⁹ *La vérité en peinture*.

The Birth of Tragedy. What does Nietzsche mean by this famous statement of the supposed denouncer of metaphysics: “Life [*Dasein*] can only be justified [*gerechtfertigt*] in aesthetic terms”? The notion appears in the original Preface (to Wagner) in Nietzsche’s first book (1872), in the main body of the text itself, and in the important Second Preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* that Nietzsche added fourteen years later in 1886. To understand what Nietzsche means by justifying life “aesthetically” and, as he himself adds, “metaphysically,” one might begin by understanding the more customary “ethical” justification of life:

In the preface I addressed to Richard Wagner I claimed that art, rather than ethics [*die Moral*], constituted the essential metaphysical activity [*die eigentliche metaphysische Thätigkeit*] of man, while in the body of the book I made several suggestive statements to the effect that existence could be justified only in aesthetic terms. (9)

The ethical justification of life referred to here, which extends according to Nietzsche from Plato and Christianity to include Kant as well as all those less famous but “serious” individuals with “earnest pursuits” (1st Preface), is the “illusion one has forgotten is an illusion,” i.e. “truth” (*Wahrheit*) which is not only knowable but also ethical insofar as both demand to be taken consistently and seriously and not as mere illusion. It was the genius of Nietzsche to have “deconstructed” Platonism and Christianity as mere versions of each other’s insistence on this ethical justification of life which, for Plato, was disguised as knowledge and for Christianity (a very Protestant form of Christianity, to be sure) as transcendent salvation.²⁰ It is in opposition to this logical/ethical justification of life that Nietzsche opposes the aesthetical “redemption” of *illusion* (*Schein*):

Thus [sc. through an aesthetic metaphysic] the world was made to appear, at every instant, as a successful solution of God’s own tensions, as an ever new vision projected by that grand sufferer for whom illusion [*Schein*] is the only possible mode of redemption. (2nd Preface, 9–10)

²⁰ Nietzsche’s “anti-Christianity,” according to Nancy’s recent *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (2008) “breaks up the sense of salvation as an escape from the world, erases all value inscribed upon a heaven, erases heaven itself, and leaves the world intact *and* touched by a strange gaping that is grace and wound at the same time. In the dissipation of nether- and hinterworlds, with their misty shrouding, lies the secret of salvation” (78; italics in the original, underlining mine). As should already be apparent, the difference between these two salvations, only one of which is to be salvaged, is precisely the difference between the two forms of the absolute that I am attempting to distinguish here.

Nietzsche immediately follows this statement with a curiously disclaimed disclaimer in which he says that: "That whole aesthetic metaphysics might be rejected out of hand as so much prattle or rant. Yet in its essential traits it already prefigured that spirit ... which was to resist to the bitter end any moral interpretation of existence whatsoever." It is certainly the case that Nietzsche later ceased to use the word "metaphysical" in the positive way in which he uses it in the 70's. And yet it is just as certain, as this quotation demonstrates, that Nietzsche did not really reject the "spirit" of metaphysics. How, then, is one to understand his "aesthetic metaphysics" in ways which distinguish it from the metaphysical "prattle" that Nietzsche clearly derides?

As we have already argued, it is not really metaphysics that Nietzsche rejects but, rather, the idea (and ideal) of knowing the absolute, an idea which necessarily veils the absolute as the "knowably unknown" supersensible substratum of thought. To this idea we contrast Nietzsche's very different notion of an aesthetic absolute from which any reality, including that of the reality of the veil, is entirely missing, leaving only an aesthetic veil—indeed, a veil which is synonymous with the aesthetic—that is defined as the very opposite of anything which can be known but, rather, as the necessary separation of knowledge from that which underlies knowledge as its underlying, metaphysical truth. As the "aesthetic justification of the world" this veil is "mere appearance" but, as Nietzsche himself states, is "profound" precisely because it *is* this absolute truth expressed in the only way it can be expressed, namely, as that which is necessarily separate from itself. As we mentioned earlier, it is in this respect that one can think of the name "Isis" as a verbal symbol of this necessary ontological doubling (Is-Is) of the aesthetic absolute.

In the passage just quoted from the 2nd Preface, where 'the world is made to appear ever anew as the successful resolution of God's own tensions,' this reality—"the world"—is no reality at all. Rather, it is a work of art, an uncanny "true illusion" that does not exist except as an artistic illusion that expresses an underlying metaphysical oneness, "God's release" from the tensions, or separations, which are the very essence of everyday, quotidian reality as well as its logical counterpart in "common language" philosophy. But perhaps the key phrase in this sentence is hidden within its grander terminology and passes by almost unnoticed: the adverbial "ever new." Notwithstanding the relevance of this phrase to Nietzsche's most important idea, that of the "eternal return of the same," it is important here because it reminds us that, unlike knowledge, the redemption of the aesthetic illusion can only be repeated "ever anew" because it is never the

thing that it is, but, rather, is always separate from an absolute that is nonetheless marked by this very separation, by this very “mark.” Nietzsche’s aesthetical—vs. ethical—metaphysics is not lacking the absolute, it merely insists that the absolute *be* absolute as the “true illusion” of a work of art whose reality only exists when it is created “ever anew,” either by its divine creator or by its equally divine audience, leaving the former to incessantly create the same different artwork²¹ and the latter to incessantly return to the same different “great book.”

Finally, because Nietzsche also rejects the ethical perspective in the name of “biology” (“What kind of figure does ethics cut when we decide to view it in the biological perspective?” 9) this “biological perspective” must be reconciled with the aesthetical perspective. Because the biological perspective, for Nietzsche, includes art as “the highest human task, the true metaphysical activity” (1st Preface, 16–17), biology must be understood in distinctly human terms as human “life,” (*bios/bia*—life/force), and human “life” must be understood as the “force” which drives humans rather than the knowledge which controls them. It is for this reason, as I have argued elsewhere,²² that Nietzsche incessantly refers to the notion of “overflowing” throughout his writings, for “rapturous overabundance” (*Rausch*) is not only the key, for Nietzsche, in understanding tragedy but is also key to understanding why understanding (*Verstand*)—and, again, what are ethics if not understanding, and vice versa?—limits humans in its very definition of “humanity.” It is in the rapturous illusions of works of art that humans exceed themselves in producing “true illusions” of who we “really” are, and it is for this reason that Nietzsche rightly understood art as the essential metaphysical activity of man. Although this is the reason that Nietzsche derides Plato, Kant and others who would define metaphysics not in aesthetic terms but, conversely, aesthetics in metaphysical terms, this is also why it is possible to defend Plato, Kant and others against Nietzsche’s attack provided that one understands that the aesthetic absolute is not and never can be an object of knowledge or understanding (*Verstand*), not even a veiled one—unless, that is, one understands the veil of *Is-is* as the unveiling of the very truth it conceals—as the very epitome of what Heidegger (according to Hadot²³) means by the concealed unconcealment of aesthetic truth, or *aletheia*, and what Jean-Luc Nancy means by the “disenclosure” (*déclousion*) of a metaphysics which “ties us to the inaccessible.”

²¹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 231.

²² *Rapturous Overabundance: Tragedy after Nietzsche*.

²³ Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, 303ff.

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